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# THANKS BEFORE GOING

By

JOHN MASEFIELD

Notes on some of the Original Poems  
of

Dante Gabriel Rossetti



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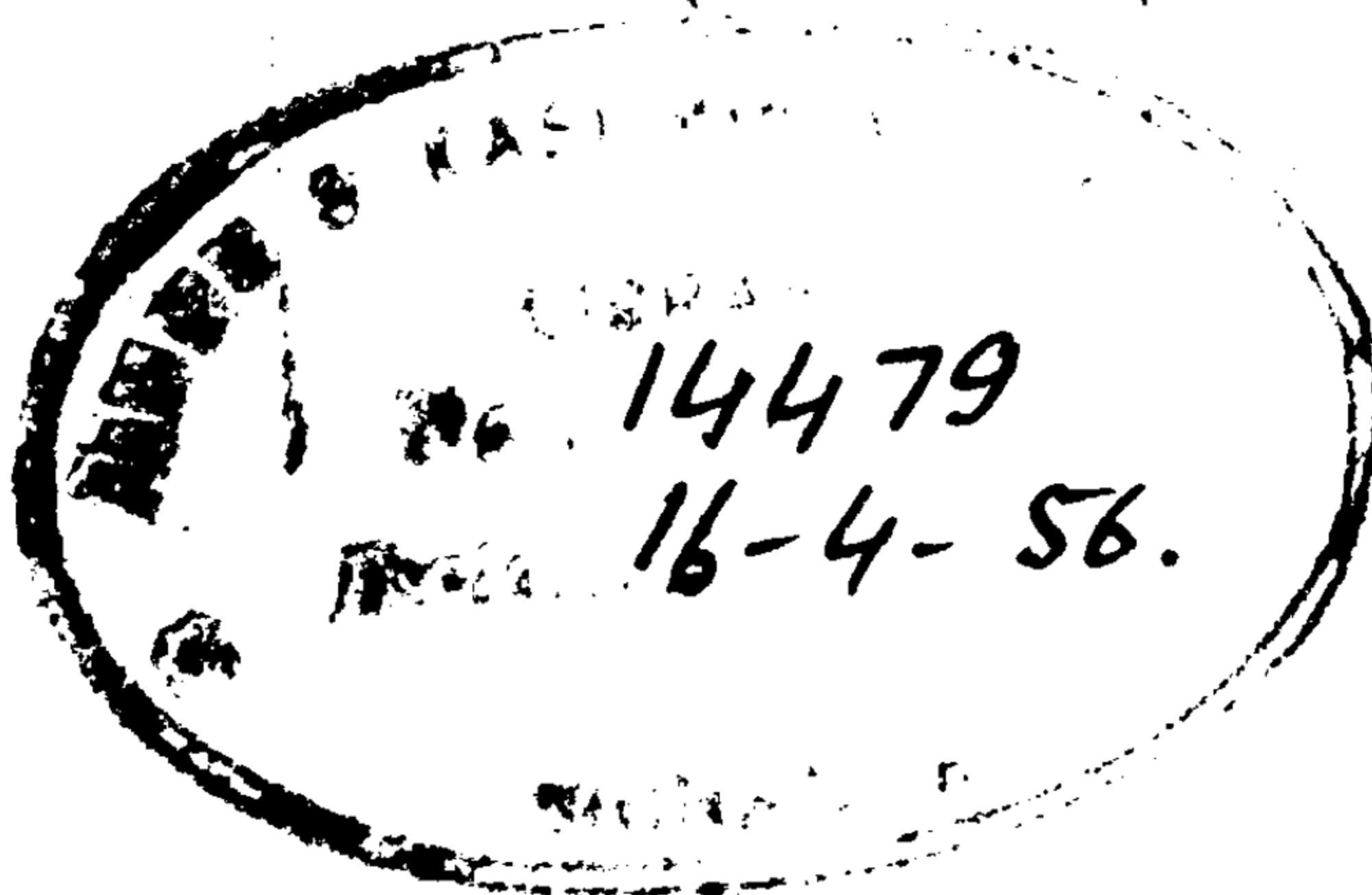
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TO  
MY WIFE

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ET 31

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## DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI.

Dante was as a star above his head.  
Darkness of Dante dimmed his Father's ways.  
Brightness of Dante kindled him to praise.  
Sorrow of Dante was his spirit's bread.

Seeing by Love and Brightness, he perceived  
Pathways of art forgotten by the guild:  
Images growing in the spirit stilled;  
The inner quiet voice that is believed.

He lost a Beatrice; and, being lone,  
Wandered in Hell, in many a midnight cirque,  
Unled by any Virgil save the will  
To set his spirit's strength against the hill,  
To pit his spirit's light against the mirk,  
And wrest the lovely image from the stone.



## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE convulsion known as the Romantic Movement was urged by many longings in millions of minds, some, perhaps, only eager to destroy existing authorities, many hungry for freedom to use the inventive faculties special to each human soul, and many others hungering and thirsting for the mystical experiences of religion. The results of these longings may be seen in the French Revolution and its sequent wars; in the free invention of the vast variety of commerce; in many devout lives and the passion of the Oxford Movement.

All these hungers of mind affected poetry, which is itself often a hunger of the mind. What was, at first, the rebellion of youth against age, a tendency to break the fetter of the couplet, to find joy in the methods of the condemned earlier schools which had not been "correct", and to make the soliloquy a cry of passion, became, in time, after bitter struggle, a School or Period of extraordinary achievement, which ended on August 4th, 1914.

Long before the Movement began, while devout poets were writing hymns, some who were less devout felt peculiar sensations in the ruins of Gothic monasteries. This sense of haunting was given precision by poets who made ballads of the ghosts of monks and knights haunting the scenes of terrible event. From the exciting fancy, that these dead people had still a shadowy life, came, soon, the startling thought, that they had once been alive, had indulged personal freedom, had followed will with passion,



and known, perhaps, in doing this last, something no longer frequent in human life.

From this thought, a study of the Middle Ages began; exact knowledge took the place of fantasy, and respect replaced the disdain of the correct. Men began to know what this land had been both before and after the Reformation. The earlier, displaced, discredited books were reprinted; ballads were collected, Chaucer, Spenser, and many other early poets were again enjoyed; and presently Robert Southey caused the reprinting of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, with results of which he little dreamed.

While men grew in knowledge of the past, they began to look at Nature with warmer feeling and more precision. The past enchanted them, the supernatural thrilled them; they now discovered the greatness amid which they move. In the joy of this discovery the fondness for painting dreadful crags and haunted ruins yielded to a contemplation of Nature herself in her quiet as in her tumult, as the many-faced mask of a Mind. A very great school of landscape-painting began and flourished here. As Wordsworth wrote: "the art of seeing had in some degree been learned". The effort of the rebels was for stating as well as for seeing; the young poets excluded abstractions and personifications from their range; they dwelt upon particular men and things; they gave up the loose general epithet, eschewed rhetoric, and sought for the deep emotion which prompted the telling word. Men had learned, that the past had been inspired, that Nature is inexhaustible, that the invention is like Nature, and that the eye to see and the heart to feel Nature are lasting parts of genius.

Something of the wild fascination of the past, and its excitement of the invention, may be learned from Gray.



“graft any wild picturesque fable, absolutely of one’s own invention, upon the Druid stock”.

“it is mere pedantry in Gothicism to stick to nothing but  
Altars and Tombs”.

Blake summed the new theory of art in one of his passionate maxims:

“Cultivate Imagination till it becomes Vision”.

Wordsworth wrote:—

“Poetry is the image of man and nature”

“all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful  
feelings”

“I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my  
subject”.

Keats wrote that poetry “should surprise by a fine excess”. He wrote of a poet having “the privilege of seeing great things in loneliness”.

These opinions and canons, held by a few, though opposed by very many, as bringing darkness, chaos, blood and death, slowly made their way; new genius coming into the world held and worked by them. Tennyson, with his matchless skill, his eye for landscape, and wide romantic range; Browning, with his critical weight and shrewd and swift vitality, shewed that their triumph was complete. As those two grew up, the eighteenth century influence diminished among us, and though the public building was not yet built with turrets nor loop-holed for bows, the castle with such things was building, and the Eglinton tournament took place. Meanwhile railways ran through the land, cities blackened and spread; and the population increased far faster than the civilisation to which it came.

Though commerce and speculation made many rich at that time, no great splendour of life could be seen; few buildings to be visited in after times; no opera of our own to be revived now; and hardly any historical painting upon the



grand scale to delight the story-lover. The middle class was growing, and becoming rich.

All the energy of the race, then, was in the middle class; all the culture and virtue of the land belonged to it. The culture was not usually very wide; but the great virtue was of truthfulness and honest finish within the narrow limits of the culture. It encouraged the painting of the time, in faithful landscape, and the literature of the time in matchless story-telling. We had then, as we have always had, a genius for story-telling. Our culture did not encourage this faculty in our painters, beyond setting some of them to illustrate the novels, although there were men living capable of great historical painting.

Between the extremes of the wanted book-illustrator and the discouraged historical painter there was, in the art-world, a simpering and prosperous survival from the later eighteenth century, engaged in painting and repeating on a very small scale the more sugary scenes from popular tales and poems; these pictures were everywhere, elaborate and empty; shewing young women very arch, young men very slick. The methods of producing this emptiness, archness and slickness presently roused a protest from outraged intelligence.

The leader and rouser of the protest was an extraordinary art student, the son of an Italian poet, art-scholar, Dante-scholar and political refugee then living in London. This art student, known to us now as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, having an instinct of what art had been and should again be, and having an unusual genius both for painting and poetry, as well as a singular commanding personal charm, gathered to himself a few friends pledged to imagine clearly and render truly all that they undertook. This company, known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, made its protest, and excited the usual fury from the establishment. A few



years later, when the Brotherhood itself, having done its work, had fallen away, its principles and leader roused much fervour among young men of genius at Oxford. These, in that fervour, set themselves to reform the world, and profoundly changed the direction and quality of all the arts and crafts in this country.

The leader, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, having attained fame as a painter and poet, passed through some frightful years of sorrow and ill-health, and died in his fifty-fourth year. His poems and paintings, his intelligence in all matters of art, the beauty and fire of his faith, made him by much the most kindling influence among the young men of my time.

Like Blake, whose genius he helped to declare to us, he was our master in two arts. From him, as from Blake and his best disciples, we have today perhaps one third of what we might have had, for the thought, that an artist might make a city beautiful was as repulsive to his time as to ours. Two frightful wholesale slaughterings throughout Europe have made a world different from his, and prone to think itself superior because it is different.

It has been a blemish in our state that men who can design have to work on small pieces for many buyers; their little works are diffused through the land in private collections. The private collections are usually scattered at intervals of a few years; it is often hard to trace the whereabouts of pictures and drawings which do not get into public galleries.

After six years of war, a student might well ask, Where can I certainly see the masterpieces of Rossetti? Some are in London, in different galleries; some in public galleries elsewhere. Who could say, without search, where the others now are? How many have been destroyed?

His Poetry, his chief contribution to the art of the world, is more easily known; Volume One of his *Collected Works*,



(1890) and the reprint of that one volume, (1891), contains all the original work preserved by himself or added from his few remaining manuscripts. The arrangement of this volume is not wholly that of the poet. Mr. William Michael Rossetti writes:—"I have divided the materials into Principal Poems, Miscellaneous Poems, Translations and some minor headings; and have in each section arranged the poems . . . in some approximate order of date. This order of date is certainly not very far from correct".

By the re-arrangement, some half dozen Principal Poems are placed among the Miscellaneous Poems. This is a matter of very small importance: but it may be mentioned here, with the reader's thanks, that the Editor served his Brother so devotedly through life, and so piously and helpfully when he had died.

Some months past, while writing of the state of English literature fifty years ago, and remembering the profound influence of Rossetti upon my companions and myself, I began to re-read the Poems and to make notes of each as I read. In this book, I offer some of these notes, taking the poems noted in the order given in the single volume, 1890-1. Good work can never be praised sufficiently; we know now, too well, that wonderful poets may be thrust from public memory by calamity.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti died when I was a little child. When I began to meet writers, most of those who had known him best were passing from the scene; or had gone, and those who remained were not easily to be met. I used to see two of these from time to time, both old and somewhat infirm, and never saw them without a kind of awe, that they had known Rossetti. I never spoke with either, but would know their voices anywhere. I used frequently to meet two who had been young adorers at his feet in his last years, but these two, both famous when I knew them, talked little of



him, save of his ill-health and sorrow. They had known only the ruins of the man. Once, to my lasting delight, I met and talked with Mr. William Michael Rossetti, then an old man. From that wise and delightful old man's excelling charm I have imaged to myself his wonderful Brother, as he must have been in the glory of his youth and happiness, when in brightness of soul he went joyously forth, and gathered his friends to bring the art of the day into a new road and widen the mind of a nation.



## PRINCIPAL POEMS

GABRIELE ROSSETTI, the poet's father, an expounder of hidden meanings in Dante, christened his son with his own name of Gabriel, and with the other names of Charles and Dante. In early manhood the poet rearranged the names: Charles was dropped, and Dante put first. At the same time, his mind began to feel with its own special poignancy and for some significant years, a spiritual link with Dante, and an inner dedication to a Beatrice of many beauties sought for through life, and perceived or imaged in many shapes and passions. This link, and this searching for Beatrice, were never far from his thought; it inspired some of his best painting, a few fine poems, and a matchless body of translation.

The life, the love and the thought of Dante were among his life's deepest realities. His Brother, whose beauty of brotherhood is beyond our praise, makes this plain to us, by beginning the volumes of the poems with the important chronicle and commentary of *Dante at Verona*.

Few could read this poem, without knowing the main forces in the life and story of Dante, and longing to know all. The poet by his matchless translations had already made known the early Dante to English readers; this later poem is a laying bare of the Dante in Exile, the homeless man, living on sufferance and without welcome in a court just tolerant of a great poet, but frankly preferring someone who could take a hand in a card game or do a little conjuring.

It is easy to underestimate the work of a pioneer. When



Rossetti wrote this poem, there was but slight interest in Dante; those were the days of German influence and of ignorance of the Germans; Italy was divided and convulsed; very few people travelled there, and that fervour of delight in early Italian art, which Rossetti, more than any one man, brought into being, had only just been kindled. When he made this study of Dante, there could have been almost no English book in the least likely to be helpful; and the poem when it came was a new thing. Rossetti had already painted some scenes in Dante's life. Now, with much ardour of reverence, and his poet's instinctive sense of what life had been to another poet, he brought within a few pages a passionate and coloured summary of the years at the Court of Verona.

His poem possesses the court of Verona, in all its very real grace and beauty yet suggesting the Mediæval filth and ferocity as close-to. We who read the poem have seen many early gracious Italian paintings of the life in such courts omitting all details not childlike and delightful. Some of the stanzas of the poem suggest these paintings, especially those story-paintings in half a dozen panels, shewing the main events in the life of some hero or heroine. Rossetti's father must have told his son of these, but we do not know how many of them the poet had seen. Some such Mediæval examples must have been on view in the Academy School, when he was there. In his greedy search for prints, he must as a boy have seen faithful engravings from early work, and as a student he must have seen the superb illuminated manuscripts, in the British Museum and elsewhere. To a mind like his, any suggestion of fitting art would create lively images of perfect art. A reader is made to feel, that the young poet as he wrote saw, as a picture, the great central vision of the poem, Florence, the lily-bearing Queen, in her pavilion under the golden lilies, acknowledging, thanking



and blessing Dante: and elsewhere saw, as a succession of little pictures, the lesser scenes, (each so clearly imagined and so thriftily told) which might, in the Italian fashion, appear as insets, below or at the sides of the central vision.

The end of this poem is very remarkable. Dante at last can endure his life there no longer, and leaves Verona; then come two strange and vivid stanzas, shewing the possible relief in the Court at the great man's going, and a speculation as to who took his place at the table. These are followed by a mention of the Can Grande, of whom we know so very little, except, that he gave a great poet, one of the four of the world's poets, daily bread for some years, and made it seem salt to his taste.

The blank verse story *A Last Confession* may seem somewhat cold and long-drawn to this generation, which has known at first hand so many resistance-movements and treacherous givings of comfort to the enemy. With the exception of a few passages in Browning, this poem may be the only English tribute given to the Italian resistance to the Austrians in 1848. It purports to be the last confession of an Italian "maqui", in whom a love of Italy and the love for a foundling girl, whom he has saved and cherished from childhood burn with a clear fire. He has tended the child into womanhood, loves her passionately, then, suddenly, she escapes into another life, quite unknown to him, and only surmised to be evil, and at their next meeting, he stabs and kills her.

The tale is supposedly told by the killer after he has been mortally wounded by the Austrians. It is told with wanderings and interludes, and harkings-back proper to the sick man but disturbing to the course of the story, and often of a more delicate and stronger imagination than the tale itself. It is to these, that one turns for later readings. Some of them are strangely beautiful. The account of his first



meeting with the lovely deserted child upon the hill-side, and her childish account of how her parents had left her is exquisite; so is the tale of his gift to her of a little image in coloured glass. The descriptions of the girl are less good; except for one telling line about her eyes. There is one superb painter's line describing the plaza in the City. Later, there is a most vivid passage of some seventeen lines, describing how the maqui, seeing spies at the Fair, trusted his life to the mountebank, who at once disguised and screened him.

A lyric, in Italian, is given in the midst of the tale, with a not quite complete English translation as a footnote. Both are by Rossetti.

The poem is Rossetti's longest use of blank verse. Blank verse, if it be not the poet's voice, or natural way, as with the masters of it, is apt to be the poet's prose, good for the sketch-book effects of clear statement, and swift seizure of essential points, but seldom kept for these matters alone, and markedly less good when some tensivity of feeling demands a fineness of style.

*The Bride's Prelude*, a long narrative in stanzas of five lines, was begun early in life, and left incomplete; then resumed, and brought to a sufficient completeness; the confession, which makes the poem, is ended. The story remained much in the poet's mind, and there are late notes, (about 1878) shewing how he thought of ending it. These notes were written in the active creative mood of his last long narratives, and they have upon them the ruthlessness of the later mood. The tale, had it been finished in that way, would have been a very fine but very terrible tale. As we have it, it is a very fine, but endurable tale, deeply moving. As Rossetti is said to have said of *Wuthering Heights*, "the characters talk English, but the scene is apparently laid in Hell".

The setting is in France in some stormy time of the



Middle Ages. On a still summer day of intense heat, while waiting for the coming of her bridegroom upon her wedding day, the intended bride tells her sister of the long-hidden shame in her past. The poem is of a strange intensity. It is imagined so completely, that the effect is overwhelming. It is as though all unendurable things, old passion, hatred, shrinking, horror of the past and of the present, the mockery of the heavy ceremonial dress and the great heat of harvest time, as well as the contrast of the innocent younger sister, (in so many ways so much fitter for life), were all pressing upon the tortured woman to tell everything. One seeks to know no more of the event but longs for some little dew of healing at the end; some coolness after the fever, and shade from the beating sun. As in most of the Rossetti poems, the reader is amazed at the poet's possession of the subject and its properties, the scene, the weather, the life of the world outside the room, the fires of hell burning in the woman's heart, and the tenderness and understanding between the women. The scene seems to have been lived through and remembered. It must have been very much in his imagination at different times throughout his life; it reads like a haunting.

The fourth of the Principal Poems in the Collection is the best-known and in some ways the most startling of all his poems, *Sister Helen*.

The theme is the magical killing of a false lover by the wasting of a waxen image by slow fire. The practice is familiar to students of primitive religions, and of savage races; some few memories of the practice, perhaps rather more than memories, exist in these islands at present.

Rossetti's poem is a duologue between the melter of the image, Sister Helen, and her little brother, who speaks for her with the relatives of her victim. It is varied by a changing refrain, which is as a chorus interpreting the action.



The effect of the question and answer, the growing terror and horror of the murder, and of the suppliants outside is intense; there is nothing like it elsewhere. It would be hard for any master of the art to improve upon the telling.

This perfection was slowly reached, during the poet's creative life. The first draft of the poem may have been made when he was twenty-three; he worked upon it at intervals, published it in or about 1853, and printed revisions of it in 1870 and 1881.

The final version, being the choice of the poet, is that which we should accept. As always in his best work, the outline is precise, the image clear, the scene made real. Any reader with the power could paint it; a lonely hall with fire-light; a gallery above, looking out upon a wild and windy moor in moonlight. As the setting is made certain, so is the action controlled, and the passion urged on. The poet has sure control of all the spirits touched by the dreadful deed, the suppliants in agony without; the broken-hearted woman seeking vengeance within, knowing that life is over for her, and that it is herself which she destroys. The creation of the innocent and happy little boy in the midst of this horror is masterly. What was the time thinking of, that it failed to urge the poet to illustrate such work with his own designs? What is this time thinking of that such work is not sweeping all our hearts with pity and terror?

The story of *The Staff and Scrip* is taken (in the main) from a feeble, improving tale in the *Gesta Romanorum*, where it is supposed to point a warning against ingratitude. A pilgrim, coming to a Queen whose lands are harried, fights for her, saves her realm, but is mortally hurt in victory. He asks that his staff and scrip may always hang in the Queen's room thenceforward. She keeps them till she is wooed by three Kings, and then throws them out.

Rossetti took a much more romantic view of pilgrim and



of Queen, and touched the dreary tract with the utmost dower of his grace. He did not make it a good story, with the essential three-fold structure, with qualities of suspense and inventions of surprise. He changed the spirit of it utterly, till the tale is left as an image of high devotion and of constancy, but it wanders its way out in a waste of good life and good feeling, (just as life does) instead of bringing the ring full circle, with a high delight, like art.

Still, what Rossetti gave to the tale is remarkable. The verse, a new five-lined stanza, exactly fitted to a tale of romantic beauty, the little last line of each stanza coming in like a refrain or a sighing, is most choicely good. His presentation of the pilgrim is masterly, and his sudden loving of the Queen and knowing that for years her face had been in his dreams, as a part of his destiny, is very beautiful. Through his arming and riding out, the verse keeps the reader happy; then, for a few stanzas, Rossetti's sense of mediæval religion makes precise images of the palace chapel. After these, there are somewhat jarring accents from the ballad manner of earlier times and lesser poetical quality. Later, when these are cleared, Rossetti writes very tenderly of the Queen's constancy to the dead pilgrim's memory. These stanzas make the action of the poem seem ancient; the last stanzas make the actors remote; it is pretty and faint, as a possibility, in another world.

No-one but Rossetti would have taken the story; none but he could have given it such life, seen it with such an eye, touched it with such colour and knowledge, or breathed into it such spirit of romance.

The poem *Jenny* is a reverie upon the lost women of London. The subject must have been for years in Rossetti's mind. He worked long and hard at one aspect of it in the unfinished picture called *Found*, in which a poor lost girl of the streets is found by her lover from the country as he



comes with his cart to morning market. Some very slight suggestion of the painting is in the poem; in both, it may be said, there is the image of a young thing caught and netted for the market. In another later (water-colour) drawing, called *The Gate of Memory*, Rossetti comes rather nearer in spirit to a moment of the poem, but the poem is his own, and the picture and drawing shew suggestions from others.

When *Jenny* was first printed, it was pioneer work. Rossetti heads it with a motto from Sheridan:—"Vengeance o' Jenny's case. Fie on her; never name her, child". Jenny never had been named until then; and Rossetti meant to name her, and to speak of her with sympathy; and roused a storm, long since stilled.

A few lines shew some memory of the scene carefully wrought out in *Found*; one brief passage recalls something of the water-colour. Jenny (although she hardly becomes alive to us in the poem) is a very different woman from the two in the two paintings. One very difficult and subtle passage in the poem has not yet revealed its message to me; I do not know what it means. For the rest, it is a reverie of Love as it affects and afflicts women; of what women are, at their noblest, and of the degradation of the fallen, and the cause of the degradation. The merit of the poem is that it named Jenny and stated her case: and this was much to have dared and done, at that time, in the consulship of Podsnap.

*The Stream's Secret*, one of the most exquisite (and difficult) of the long poems, was begun at Penkill Castle, in Ayrshire, in the autumn of 1869. The stream is the Tel-whappie Burn, a lovely and rather long tributary of the Girvan Water. The poem is written in a subtle and choice six-line stanza, probably the invention of the poet. The 1st, 2nd, 4th and 6th line of each stanza has eight; the 3rd and 5th line of each stanza ten syllables. The alternation of lapse and arrest makes a rhythm or movement suggesting



leisurely water, intent upon that life of its own which is one of the charms of any stream. The sense created, or impression given is, of water going by with something mysterious to say. This something, as the poet imagines, is a message murmured to it at its well-head by Love himself, and this message, the poet seeks to know. Is it, that soon the hour will become alive, and he and his love be at one? He knows about the weary past hours, and will endure no bidding to give up loving; he has loved and still loves; she knows his love and has compassion upon it, but is now far away, and the hour that will bring her back does not yet appear. The Hours in the poem are spectral or spiritual figures of desolation or beauty; and sisters.

Then follows a long and tender passage or brooding upon the ecstasy of that reunion, or completed union. Then, as the stream goes on, not saying when that love shall be, the poet cries that surely the Love-Hour is near, standing beside the dial, waiting for the dawn to cast the shadow upon the mark; how much longer, how soon, will it be? The stream makes no answer.

Then the poet cries that far otherwise will he be called to his beloved. At some dark silent well-head Love stands, a Love with the eyes of Death, and with the wings of tired Life, to give him gathered water, after which sky and land will be forgotten and only love be left. He cries to his beloved that he would that he were already drinking, so that they might be together. He cries to the water, asking if his love be not somewhere weeping even as he?

It is so poignantly felt, and so strange a poem that the reader wonders from how many moods it sprang. Some might judge, from likenesses of mood, that it was first planned and begun as one of the love-poems written to Elizabeth Siddal, and replanned and finished after her death, when the images (and the image was ever a reality to



Rossetti) of Willow-wood were presences within his mind. He never made anything of a gentler, more touching beauty, and in no other poem spoke so utterly from the desolate heart of sorrow.

It is most lovely verse; certain lines are among the most exquisite he ever made. The presence of the stream, and the personal life of the stream become hauntings in the mind, and this strangeness, mixed with the longing and the sorrow of the poet, and the thought that Love is somewhere up the glen, in a solitude, in his mystery, able to answer, if he only would, plead in the mind; for all mortals seek his answer.

*Rose Mary* was written in the early autumn of 1871. The tale seems to be an intricate and ingenious shaping and merging of romance and folk-belief into something new and strange. The scene may be the Scottish Border. Scotland is very rich in stories all ready for the poet; her people remember these tales; and Rossetti, like every good poet, was prone to suggestion from any living tradition and could give to every tradition his own poetical quality; his visits to Scotland were fruitful of poetry.

The main theme of the poem is, the folk-belief, that the future may be seen by the pure maiden who gazes into a crystal. She who gazes being impure will see misleadingly.

The widowed Mother of *Rose Mary* has a certain magical crystal, a beryl, brought from Palestine by a crusader; this beryl is the home of fire-spirits, who can reveal the future truly to the pure; but will mislead the impure.

*Rose Mary*, the girl, is pledged to Sir James of Heron-haye.

Her widowed Mother, believing her to be pure, and fearing that dangers threaten Sir James upon a journey, bids *Rose Mary* look into the beryl, to see what and where the dangers may be. She looks into the beryl, tells what she sees,



and the Mother thinking that the vision has shewn the truth, sends word to Sir James to shun the road where the dangers have been seen.

Rose Mary, however, being no longer among the pure, having long since given herself to Sir James, has been misled by the beryl spirits, and the directions sent to Sir James take him into ambush, where he is killed. The Mother then learns that the dead man has seduced her daughter and also pledged his troth to another woman.

Rose Mary, outraged, jilted, heart-broken and hopeless, goes alone to the shrine where the beryl stone is kept. Knowing that the deed will bring Death upon her, she takes her Father's sword, smites the beryl-stone asunder, releases the spirits within it and falls dead. Some stanzas of gentleness at the end suggest that all is well with her.

Late in his life, in one of the revisions which Rossetti was fond of giving to his work, he added to the story, as an appendix to each part of the tale, a Beryl-Song from the spirits in the stone. These add nothing to the narrative and are unpleasing as lyric; but it seems to me just possible that Rossetti may have had in mind a performance, in which these songs would make an interlude after the moments of strain in which the parts of the story end. Usually, he had no thought of performance, nor can one be sure that that time had possible performers for any of his tales.

The beryl-songs are in character. They are the confused, writhing, frustrated utterances of imprisoned spirits. They suggest to me a chorus sung and danced to music in the intervals of story-telling; and as such, in appropriate costume in the colours of beryls, their effect might be very beautiful. Certainly, they need music, movement and colour to give them full distinction in the mind. The tale is the best of the long narratives; it is as certain in its power as *Sister Helen* though its indirect method may win it fewer



readers. The merging of bloody, treacherous and awful happenings with uncanny suggestion, and these with the pitiful tenderness of Mother and Child make the tale most splendid.

So far as I know, it has never been performed with choice speakers, miming, and this chorus of the spirits. Alas, so many pipes of genius play, without stirring dancers to dance.

The story of *The White Ship*, in which the son of Henry the First of England was lost, is supposedly told by a French butcher, and has therefore a certain roughness of tone and texture. The twelfth century is a remote past, and the butcher takes some two pages to explain the opening situation to his nineteenth century readers. However, when once the White Ship puts forth, it is good swift narrative; the ship and her passengers are clearly seen and made living for us, in two couplets of much imaginative grasp. When the ship strikes upon the rock, Rossetti makes the vivid note, the folk-lore note, that the knowledge of something strange reached the rest of the ships far on ahead, out of sight.

The horror of boatless wreck is known to all; so often, the horror is changed to glory by an act of self-devotion; so, here, it is, by the worthless Prince going back to try to save his Sister; then, the boat is swamped by the multitude trying to get into her, and all are in the sea. All that has been told to this point, makes a poem in itself, and is marked by Rossetti as such; the end has been reached.

The story has an integral epilogue in most English minds, that it was very difficult to break the news to Henry the First, and that he never smiled again, after the news was told. The English expect this epilogue, and Rossetti adds it. It might have been better, had he placed the telling of this epilogue in the mouth of, shall we say, the butcher's confessor. As it is, it is somewhat delayed by an account of



the butcher's experience in the sea, and then, by the excuses made by the courtiers, to explain the Prince's absence. The image of the little boy who at last breaks the news to the King is charmingly finished; the grace of the description would have better suited the confessor's mouth than the butcher's. As I have said, these tales could hardly have been performed in the London of the nineteenth century; they might be performed now, perhaps, for the delight of elegance, if elegance exist still. Speakers, musicians and dancers exist now; why should they not use the noble inventions of genius? They prefer them; the public prefers them, whenever it has a chance to see them. What bars the way?

*The King's Tragedy*, the last to be written of the long poems, is said to have been first suggested to Rossetti in 1869, when staying at Penkill Castle, in Ayrshire, and writing *The Stream's Secret*. His old friend, William Bell Scott, the poet-painter, was living at the castle at the time, painting wall-decorations from subjects taken from the poem, *The Kingis Quhair*, by King James the First of Scotland. Rossetti was much impressed by the story of the life and death of this very remarkable King and man.

By all instinct and nature, Rossetti answered in terms of art to every tradition, living or shadowy which came to his notice. He was, then and later, stirred by the strength of the living Scottish tradition, which abides like Scotland's rocks, to inspire her sons. Rossetti wrote the tale, with his utmost remaining strength, in the Spring of 1881.

He writes of it, in a letter, as a ballad. It is surely very much more important than any ballad; it is a narrative poem of over 700 lines of verse, with a scope, a plan, a development and decoration impossible in a ballad. It is, however, written as though spoken in the familiar ballad speech and measure.



One would judge, that he saw in the fable three opportunities for his great poetical powers and sympathies. First, the chance to present the image of a woman doing simply and suddenly a heroic thing from greatness of nature. This he found in Kate Barlass, the heroine, who thrust her arm into the loops of the bolts in her effort to hold the King's door against the traitors. He makes her tell the story.

Next, the chance to present the image of a loving woman implacable in vengeance. This he found in the image of the Queen.

Thirdly, the chance to make the portrait of a Humanist King, poet, light-bringer and ruler; a wonderful being. This is the real theme. James was a man of Plutarch, a Shakespearean subject. Had Shakespeare taken him, and, as it were, merged Cæsar, Theseus, Duncan and Laertes, touching the result with beauty and fire, and working, shall we say, the last acts of his tragedy into the flame of a passionate justice wrought by the widow, we should have had another Shakespearean triumph.

Rossetti's choice was to tell the tale indirectly, as from the lips of a witness and therefore this third chance was not taken to the full; the King is more talked-of, than living; but he was much in Rossetti's mind, and might well have been the subject of another poem had the poet lived.

The first of the chances gives but an episode to the poem; the second makes the ending ruthless, instead of calm; the third is not quite taken; there remains, however, a fourth; the chance of making, to the very top of his invention, the figure of a spæ-wife, who foretells the dread event. This fourth chance, Rossetti took to the full, and made from it one of his outstanding triumphs. Her first appearance is the most terrifying passage in modern English poetry; her second coming is almost as shocking.

Even if performance by speakers, with music and



interludes of dancing, was not in Rossetti's mind, it ought always to be in ours.

One or two points in this story are against performance. It is told as from the lips of Kate Barlass; this limits the tale to one principal woman-speaker, to whom only the spae-wife can give a real rest. At his killing, the King is too much a victim helpless in a trap; not thus do the heroes of epic, or saga, or the finer ballad, die. The exultation of the queen at the torturing of the murderers is not the mood of art, but of harsh fantasy.

Still, apart from an instant's hesitancy in the beginning, it is a well-told tale well-worth performance by the choice speakers of Scotland and of this land. The opportunity of the spae-wife is one offered by few poets; she is Rossetti's contribution to the epic; and a marvellous gift she is.



## THE HOUSE OF LIFE

THE poem, *The House of Life*, was a design for many years in Rossetti's mind, as a work, which when complete, should contain the images of all his deeper moods.

From the first, the poem was to show the House of Life, that is, shall we say, the human being in whom Life dwells, a strange thing, deeply moved in youth by the passion of Love, profoundly moved at all times by the passionate Arts, much subject to change, often tragical, and, whatever the Love and whatever the mastery, doomed to Death, whatever that may prove to be. He saw the Life as a delighted creature moving to a change, and then as a changed creature moving to a Fate, sustained and inspired by passions greater than the life and seemingly eternal.

What Hope there may be in the creature must be centred upon one or all of these passions; what Eternity it can snatch must be drawn from them.

The reader will know as he reads, that the Love in Rossetti, which prompted the work, was intense; that the Change, which altered the work, was of a frightful, tragical anguish; and that his consecration to great causes alone saved him (and barely saved him) from madness and desolation.

It is never an easy poetry; some of the sonnets lead into a world to which only this mind knew the way; sometimes the meaning eludes and has to be sought for, and resought;



almost every line will yield more suggestion the more it is considered. Usually, the thought is close, the structure sure, the utterance final.

It has been said, of course, that it is not a complete House and does not shew the whole of Life. There must ever be many who can say what a thing is not. Let us remember, that it gives us the considered utterances of some years of Rossetti's life; that it was his complete House and states his life; that he was an unusual, inspired and kindling being from whom Love brought much, in whom anguish of mind checked much, whose work and spirit went out against the anguish and left an inspiration to us.

The poem is himself, and as it is by much the most important of his life's work, it needs to be looked at room by room, stanza by stanza.

In the volume, *Poems*, of 1870, the House of Life was made up of fifty sonnets and eleven songs. That division of the book was called

Sonnets and Songs  
Towards a Work to be called  
'The House of Life'.

A bracketed note on the next page reads:—

(The first twenty-eight sonnets and the seven first songs treat of love. These and the others would belong to separate sections of the projected work.)

In the volume, *Ballads and Sonnets* of 1881, the full series is called

The House of Life:  
A Sonnet-Sequence.

Part I.

Youth and Change.

Part II.

Change and Fate.

A bracketed note on the next page reads:—



(The present full series of *The House of Life* consists of sonnets only. It will be evident that many among those now first added are still the work of earlier years.)

In the notes to the First Volume of *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, of 1890, Mr. William Michael Rossetti appends "a rough suggestion of what may have been" the sequence of the sonnets "in point of date". The earliest of them, he tells us, "may date in 1848, or even a year or so preceding. The latest come close before, or even in, 1881, in the autumn of which year the series was published in the same form which it now bears". As this "rough suggestion" is usually the best suggestion that now exists, I have added, in brackets, in ordinary numbers, the place each sonnet bears in his list, while preserving, in his Brother's Roman numbers, the place each sonnet bears in the poem.

The full series of the sequence has for prelude a sonnet upon the nature of the sonnet. A version of this sonnet was written by him beneath a design in pen and ink in a book presented to his Mother on her Birthday, the 27th April, 1880. The design has been reproduced. A winged and draped woman wearing a crown of olive or poetical bay, overshadows the sonnet, holding a winged hour-glass in her left hand, (the wings are to suggest "the moment") and a strange, crescent-shaped small lute in her right hand. The lute has fourteen strings, one for each sonnet line. A thorny rose-tree in blossom is on the right of the design, and flowered sprays of it trail upon the left. In these left-hand sprays is shewn a double coin, bearing on one side a butterfly, and on the other, the eternity symbol, of a snake swallowing its tail. In the circle of the snake are the Greek letters alpha and omega.

The sonnet thus decorated differs in two lines from the version printed in the book, which has been made



suaver and happier in both instances.

Not many English poets whose practice is worth attention have written about their art; Rossetti's theory and practice deserve study.

His theory of the sonnet makes one think at once of those early Italian painters who passed years of training as goldsmiths and jewellers. He gives an image of a sonnet as a ceremonial cup or amulet, carved of a precious substance, or stricken as a coin from a precious metal. One cannot doubt, that his own personal practice throughout his life was to design his sonnets, as a goldsmith might design cups. The structure is precious, subtle and abiding, and can be considered and enjoyed as a work of art quite apart from the wine of thought poured into it.

Most of his sonnets follow the Italian form; and divide into two parts, an octave of rigid pattern, and a sestet admitting variety. He does not use the Shakespearean sonnet-form of three quatrains followed by a couplet, though he sometimes ends with a couplet. He gave a great deal of thought to each sonnet, and charged each one with his unusual intellectual virtue.

Sonnet I, *Love Enthroned*, (57) is a judgement of what is beautiful to man; Truth (knowledge), Hope, Fame, (or storied nobleness), Youth, with its attractive graces, and Life itself, or human activity. Above all these, the poet sees Love, or transfiguring understanding of any kind, whether linked to human devotion, to ecstasy, or to imaginative art, but ever the supreme power in the world, above the world, undying, and of a beauty which even our best dreams cannot shew to us.

Sonnet II, *Bridal Birth*, (1) suggests that human love between woman and man is spiritually born of the woman, like a living child who swiftly grows to the power to guard and cherish them, who is a light to them, the only light, at



death, and in his turn becomes their parent at their death, when they enter a new life.

Sonnet III, *Love's Testament*, (35), formerly called *Love's Redemption*, and now made more of a general statement than the intensely personal love-poem it used to be, also urges that any human love brings nearer Love Himself and the Kingdom of Love. In its earliest form, the poem was rapturous rhetoric; in its present form it is feeling eloquence. The re-writing of the poem did not touch the last six lines, but made them remote from the rest of the sonnet; they now take the reader to a scene so imagined that it might be seen and painted; a cliff-foot by the sea, perhaps, as in Ingres' picture, and the Beloved coming down rocky stairs to save the poet from a place of sighs.

Sonnet IV, *Lovesight*, (36) seemingly the fruit of the same mood of love which made the preceding sonnet, asks what the end of life might be without her, what Hope would seem then, at the approach of Death? Rossetti was to learn, too cruelly, the answer to this question. The thought of Dante's lost Beatrice was ever much in his mind during his younger manhood. I do not doubt, that the poem was written to Elizabeth Siddal during his courtship, and that in that courtship there was one sweet and never-to-be-forgotten moment, when he saw her face imaged in the running water of a spring. This sonnet may contain the first allusion to that image, which was to appear to him again in poignant hours.

Sonnet V, *Heart's Hope*, (53). This superb, mature work is one of the royal utterances of his career. Who could alter a word of it without loss? It is a useless task to hold a candle in sunlight, but the sonnet is a testimony to sunlight and something of the kind must be done. It is a cry from the perception that love is the only illuminant, that it links all things, littlest and greatest, and that by its light



all things can be understood and spiritually known.

Sonnet VI, *The Kiss*, (27). This early love-poem must have been written to Miss Siddal, and gone with her to the grave.

Sonnet VII, *Supreme Surrender*, (28). The famous eighth line of this love-poem has become proverbial.

Sonnet VIII, *Love's Lovers*, (59) is another mature, singularly skilful and artful work of arrangement and ordering, so that the final lines may have the fullest effects of tenderness and beauty. Again, in the one part, the work is the choicest of poetical rhetoric; in the other, the poet takes you to a place so seen that it can be painted, among presences so known that they can be felt. A new world is opened to the reader in these six lines; a new life is suggested to him; a new way of thought made real.

Sonnet IX, *Passion and Worship*, (29). The thoughts of Rossetti made his mind a stage of living presences. It is possible that he made pencil sketches of the thoughts of this and similar sonnets. In this poem, we meet for the first time with the moonlit water in the grove, where the lover in separation longs for his beloved with ardour and with suffering, both precious parts of Love.

Sonnet X, *The Portrait*, (37). This, unlike the early poem of the same title, may refer to a portrait of Miss Siddal, whom he often drew and painted both before and after his marriage, in many lovely works. Many thousands of people have come to these, to look upon her, as Rossetti so proudly claimed; and I suppose never, without wonder at her beauty, and a greater reverence thence forward for womankind.

Sonnet XI, *The Love-Letter*, (38). The last lines of this poem are among the rare poetical allusions to what many poets have known, the thing called telepathy, or some form of mental communication between minds in sympathy, however distant they may be.



Sonnet XII, *The Lover's Walk*, (60). This reads like a recollection of some happy walk of Rossetti's with his love, (we would gladly know where, and by what stream) mixed with a very fine statement of his inmost thought, that any heart in love touches an eternal love of passionless beauty.

Sonnet XIII, *Youth's Antiphony*, (61). This must come from the same mood, as part of the same little group of poems. The two lovers are, as it were, made actors explaining their passion; the poet reveals the everlasting passionless passion within whose being they have come.

Sonnet XIV, *Youth's Spring-Tribute*, (62). This playful, pretty poem has two remarkable painter's lines. These, (the seventh and eighth) sum up the English landscape of a hesitant Spring.

Sonnet XV, *The Birth-Bond*, (7). No doubt, this was one of the dearest of the poems offered to Elizabeth Siddal.

Sonnet XVI, *A Day of Love*, (39). In this poem, a strange mind fills some lines with what seems triviality; and then, suddenly in the final couplet, charges the trivial moment with destiny and powers moving from eternity.

Sonnet XVII, *Beauty's Pageant*, (63).

Sonnet XVIII, *Genius in Beauty*, (64). These sonnets read like the tribute to someone of a more abundant and striking beauty than Miss Siddal. The poems are not touched with any deeper feeling than admiration for an unusual appearance. Someone, whom Rossetti probably described in conversation as "a stunner", was in his presence, and no doubt made him wish to paint her. Whether he ever did, we cannot tell; the poems suggest that he made a drawing. He makes the often-quoted remark, that such beauty is genius, and shows, also, that the beauty was of the enduring kind, due to perfection of form and of spirit, and not subject to decay with the passing of youth, the loss of colour and the wrinkling of skin.



Sonnet XIX, *Silent Noon*, (65).

Sonnet XX, *Gracious Moonlight*, (56). These contrastings of Sun and Moon, presence and absence, as they affect a lover, have been deliberately placed in contrast with each other. If they were not written in the country, they were certainly written with keen perception and enjoyment of the extreme beauty of May-time in grassland by water. The sunlight poem, in its eighth line, sums up, in a proverbial line, the perfection of a lovely hot day. Later in the poem, the poet takes this silent ecstasy, as the type and perfection of close companionship; all delight and understanding, with no need for any word.

The moonlight poem is elusive, like its subject, but when it shines forth out of its cloud at the end it is very beautiful.

Sonnet XXI, *Love Sweetness*, (40). The unusual mind marks the last three lines.

Sonnet XXII, *Heart's Haven*, (66). In the last lines of this sonnet there is another linking of the images of moon and water, so frequent in the middle period of his career. In this stanza, the spiritual harmony of human love is the tune of Love, and the face of Love appears, as the moon's face, through the harmony. The human lovers are as waters moving in music at the moon's bidding.

Sonnet XXIII, *Love's Baubles*, (41), reads like the study for an enchanting frieze, in some public building given to gladness. His time perhaps had no such building, and did not invite him to paint the subject, nor did he ever paint it; but one who admired him painted it a few years after his death.

Sonnet XXIV, *Pride of Youth*, (90), is a late interjection, among the early and mid-period love-poems. It comes like a splash of cold water. It springs from a mature mood, which has seen, that Life is change, having only its moment, and having to use that moment, without looking back. There is



startling insight into the child's view of some elder person's death, that naturally, it is the elder person's turn to die. Then follow lines, shewing the elder's knowledge of the speed with which that turn comes to all things, and of the sadness of the loss of the things Life has to lose.

Sonnet XXV, *Winged Hours*, (42), seems to have been recast, after a lapse of years and the falling of destiny, so that the mood of the end is much unlike that of the beginning; it is a bleak ending, with one admirable line.

Sonnet XXVI, *Mid-Rapture*, (67) also reads like a recasting of a poem after a lapse of years and change of mood. The sixth line is of an exquisite tenderness.

Sonnet XXVII, *Heart's Compass*, (68), is a mature piece of rousing rhetoric, stating Rossetti's constant faith, that Love is inspiration, imagination, light, music, certainty, and Life itself.

Sonnet XXVIII, *Soul-Light*, (69), must be a part of the same mood. It, too, proclaims that Love is the source of all light and all refreshment, and that through his beloved the poet draws these as from an eternal spring.

Sonnet XXIX, *The Moonstar*, (49) must describe some meeting of his beloved with a famous beauty, some such "stunner" as is described in XVIII, and seeming all the more lovely from the contrast.

Sonnet XXX, *Last Fire*, (50), Rossetti's eye for Nature was ever that of an inspired genius. Who could make a more perfect contrast of a winter day with a summer day than that in the tenth and eleventh lines (for Winter) and the glorious ever-quotable twelfth, (for Summer)?

Sonnet XXXI, *Her Gifts*, (51), He who reads this sonnet to the end will find reward in the last line.

Sonnet XXXII, *Equal Troth*, (52). This room in the House had to have its stanza in the poem. It seems to have been added by act of will rather than by grace of



light. The thirteenth line has a full easy splendour about it.

Sonnet XXXIII, *Venus Victrix*, (53); perhaps the lady was more pleased with the result than we can be.

Sonnet XXXIV, *The Dark Glass*, (54), after the less moving poems, this comes suddenly as one of the maturest and deepest of them all to exalt Love as the only light of Life, as the only eternal power touching this passing mystery. The wonderful summary of Rossetti's own place in the world, (made in the last six lines), is such as we might expect from him. Any beautiful life revealed Love to him in an abundant measure, and then his arts could display it.

Sonnet XXXV, *The Lamp's Shrine*, (55), is another stanza from the same mood. The eighth line has been frequently quoted; some prefer the eleventh and twelfth lines.

Sonnet XXXVI, *Life-in-Love*, (20), though earlier than the two preceding sonnets belongs in this place, as though to mark the passing of a mood of exaltation into a mood of personal feeling and tragical memory. It marks the entry of the shadow of Death into the House.

Sonnet XXXVII, *The Love-Moon*, (21), This is one of the most thoughtful of the early poems; no explanation of it can now be given. Plainly, the beginning alludes to someone, long since dead, who once was Rossetti's very life, and of whom he writes with much tenderness; we must suppose her to have been a woman whom this unusual child adored. Another part of the poem, so far as we can judge, must refer to Miss Siddal, with whom he was then in love. In the conclusion, the poet says that in loving these two he has obeyed the call of Love Himself, and that Death may show that these women were phases of a Love-Moon lighting him to Love.

The quality of the reverie and the gentleness of the feeling make the poem most unusual.

Sonnet XXXVIII, *The Morrow's Message*, (43), I do not



know when this poem was written, but judge that it belongs to one of the frightful years after the death of his Wife. In the poem, its place and purpose are to shew with what splendour of inspiration a spirit can face the darkness, fling it aside, and advance, with re-consecration, to shatter Death with the spirit of Beauty. Some lovely memory of the Vita Nuova, perhaps some exquisite dream of the dead Elizabeth Siddal, who was as Beatrice to him, may have come like the light. This splendid stanza ends with much courage of soul and tenderness of word.

Sonnet XXXIX, *Sleepless Dreams*, (44) is the monument, not of a moment, but of a long and grim succession of sleepless nights.

Sonnet XL, *Severed Selves*, (77), a word from one of the dark later years, describes estrangement rather than bereavement; it tells of some once happy affection, now at an end.

Sonnet XLI, *Through Death to Love*, (78), is a lesser utterance from some recurrence of the mood of XXXIV; it has the same faith, in the presence of the same uncertainty (and symbols). It has eight hyphenated words, and as always when he uses these much, the thought and image are less precise than usual.

Sonnet XLII, *Hope Overtaken*, (70), is one of the most beautiful of all the sonnets, and well worth the trouble it may take in the reading. Its cry is that of every artist who goes through years of despair, in which even Art seems gray, and then feels a re-illumination, with the old certainty, that only this is eternal life, only this can save. Rossetti, in the years which gave this sonnet came as near to despair as man may come; but with what a glory of beauty his great soul beat the darkness back.

Sonnet XLIII, *Love and Hope*, (71), might be described as the shadow of XLII, written during the passing of the mood which made the remembered poem.



Sonnet XLIV, *Cloud and Wind*, (72) another stanza, written when the mood of XLII had faded still more, when the re-illumination was again subject to the storm, when the darkness had returned, and the old courage faced it, summing the chances with the old clearness.

Sonnet XLV, *Secret Parting*, (45). The exact meaning of this sonnet cannot now be known. It comes from some deep experience shared perhaps with Elizabeth Siddal, and tragical in memory after her death.

Sonnet XLVI, *Parted Love* (46) is a simple and passionate statement of a lover's anguish when parted from his love. It is a very fine sonnet; it goes with superb movement, growing in feeling to the end.

Sonnet XLVII, *Broken Music*, (5) makes the reader wonder, if it were not much recast in maturer years. It is compact of varying images of listening; the mother's, for her child's first speech; his own, in a time of misery, for inspiration; and, in a time of bereavement, for a word from the dead beloved, who is there murmuring (with that favourite image, the murmuring seashell) but, like himself, is not permitted to speak.

Sonnet XLVIII, *Death-in-Love*, (19), must be the record of a thing seen, in dream or the imagination, of strangeness and significance impelling him to paint or write. It reads as though he had had some thoughts of painting the scene; he may have made some sketch for it, not now known. Life is passing; in his retinue is a male figure winged like Love, and bearing Love's banner on which is wrought the face of the Beloved. The sounds of new life come from the banner, and the poet is overwhelmed and lost, upon the brink of something new. A veiled woman coming up, catches the banner to its staff, draws a feather from the bearer's wing, holds it to his lips, and shews that it does not stir; then says, that this Love is part of her, and that she is Death.



As Life passes, agonies of sorrow strike all men; that veiled woman has her word for all of us.

The shadow of Death entered the House of Life at the XXXVIth sonnet, and remained in it thenceforward, as a fear not to be banished, as a threat not to be avoided, to which the two things, Love and Hope alone offered something as a guard, which is yet not a guard, which cannot guard . . . and yet . . . are Love and Hope; and if these be not eternal, what is Life?

With the darkness of the shadow of Death, the poems have become tenser and more full of dread. With the XLVIIIth sonnet, Death is in the House, and the heart is left desolate.

Sonnets XLIX, L, LI and LII (22) make the poem known as *Willowwood*. These were very famous among us when I was young; they were known to all of us by heart. Fifty years, ten of them among the worst the world has known, have made them perhaps less regarded by the spirit of man than formerly; the survivors from my time understand them better, and rank them higher now; Time has proved them.

The lover of Rossetti's poems will know how he associates water with reverie and sad emotion, and perhaps especially with loving pity. The mood of these four sonnets is the mood of *The Stream's Secret*; it is a mood of grief; of very poignant grief, but of grief in the presence of a mystery so deep that it may be beautiful, and in any case, so much a part of life that the mind must explore it as far as search can go. With Rossetti, the mind is a person; some of the thoughts met by the mind may seem to be persons, living in a world of symbols, which can be so painted, that those who brood upon them may understand.

In the poem of *Willowwood*, Rossetti, who is desolate from grief, beyond all doubt for the death of his Wife, is at some



woodside well, at the fount or spring, perhaps, of that stream of which he craved the secret. The place was clearly seen by Rossetti, whether it was seen in dream, in vision, or by his honest habit of precise thought, and of uttering nothing not wrought to the utmost possible precision of firm wiry outline. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood permitted nothing vague or indefinite. He knew the place, and could describe or paint it. As he had imagined in *The Stream's Secret*, Love, the person, is at this well or spring, uttering his secret in the music of a lute. Love does not speak nor look at him, but their eyes meet in the images in the water, and at this the music of the lute becomes the voice of the lost beloved one. Love stirs the water, and at once his image in it becomes the image of the beloved, rising to kiss him.

Then Love sings, with some such strange suggestion of an eternity subject to change, as makes the XLVIIIth sonnet so wonderful. The poet sees dumb people by the trees, each standing alone, each either himself or herself, each the ghost of some day of the past in which their love had not spoken. The poem is intense with the misery of the passing thing which yet knows the lasting thing.

The song of Love then changes to a pity for the bereaved lovers, and from the pity passes into a counsel from the very depths of Life; that it would be sad, if these banks of bitter memory should annul the soul; that she, released from life, should be drawn partly back to life, and yet not wholly back, by the wild longings of the bereaved. It is suggested, that she is fulfilling a purpose, and that sorrow here may check that purpose.

Then Love's song dies, and the beloved's face falls away into the water, and there is nothing left but doubt, and anguish, with understanding of the greatness of the loss; of the beauty of the spirit gone; yet even in this instant there



comes something of the sympathy and the illumination of Love; there is something of the eternal world in the deep moment.

As these four sonnets make the most beautiful and the most poignant of all his personal utterances, and spring from his very inmost heart, poets should be proud that he used their art for them; he did not paint the scene. But it is strange, that the scene has not been painted in some lovely sweep, running round some gathering place where people can be glad of poetry. Perhaps there is no such place yet? It is sad, that it has not been devised, with the utmost possible beauty of music, costume and movement, with every possible grace and gentleness, as a ballet-suite. But did not the happy Bizet say, "No, not sad; only stupid".

Sonnet LIII, *Without Her*, (73), is another poem about bereavement. It is not like the others, which strive to touch the new life known to the beloved; it is a bleak summary of life on earth without her; it is a desolating list of blanks. There is much power of style in the ending of this poem.

Sonnet LIV, *Love's Fatality*, (74), is another dream or vision of powers affecting life. The poet sees Love, the illuminant, the ecstatic and dynamic power of Life, shackled to Vain-Longing, or the desire in some way or another thwarted and made of no effect. In his thought, this Vain-Longing, which is not further defined, and may be due to any obsession or tragedy, is the iron heart of Life, or death of Love. It is a profound utterance, from Rossetti's most steadfast belief.

Sonnet LV, *Stillborn Love*, (23) a poem which Rossetti liked, comes from a deep emotion, and is among the best of them. It is his own, personal way of stating the general truth of the sonnet before it, and ten will know it by heart for every one who knows the other. As always with Rossetti, the hour is something which Love may make eternal; he



writes here of a thwarted hour, a thing only of hope, listening to the breaking of the years like waves upon a beach, and listening outside the house of Love to the singing of the chosen, happier hours who are within it. All this is very strange and unlike the utterance of any other poet; it is followed by a most happy and lovely ending.

Sonnets LVI, LVII, LVIII, *True Woman*, (making the 88th stanza in Mr. W. M. Rossetti's list). This group was made late to summarize and complete the first half of the poem. The first of the three, *Herself*, has three lines which have become proverbial; it is eloquent and gracious rhetoric, with a sudden, unexpected, and enchanting image in the last line. The second, *Her Love*, is a clear, rhetorical summary. The third, *Her Heaven*, leaps out of rhetoric into a rapturous statement of his own aims in Art, and perceptions of immortality. To him the *True Woman*, a bodily beauty shewing a spiritual perfection, the very flower of Life, has been his subject through life, the matter of his poems, the vision of his paintings. It is through this, and the Love of this, that Life has any grace at all, and any Hope. Nothing but a steadfastness in this love, a steadfastness marked with the knowledge of coming death, will bring any glad eternity.

Sonnet LIX, *Love's Last Gift*, (89, and therefore one of the last of all the poems) is a proud utterance. Love, at the end, tells the poet that all growth and flower and fruit are Love's very own, and that all these had been given in Spring and Summer; but that now these things end with Autumn, which foretells a worse time. But, since the poet has praised Love, there must be a last gift, a bright leaf of laurel, over which no winter has power.

## *Part II. Change and Fate.*

Sonnet LX, *Transfigured Life*, (79). This second part of the full series opens, like the first, with a sonnet about



lyrical poetry, or personal poetical utterance. The first eight lines admirably describe the changing of a child's face during growth, from its first state, suggesting the faces of the parents, till it has acquired its own stamp of personality. In the last six lines, the poet says that the Joy and Pain of the poet are the parents of the utterance, and that these should be intense, if the work be to live, however much the controlling art may condense the poem. The poem when compressed should be charged with communicable feeling. The last two lines of the sonnet may seem inexplicable to this generation. They made my own generation ask "What doest thou here, Elijah?"

Sonnet LXI, *The Song-Throe*, (85), is a somewhat later extension of this thought, urging that poetry should move to tears from its intensity. Suddenly, the mood changes and a new thing is said. The god of inspiration carries a bow as a Hunter who shoots at the poet's soul, and if his arrow hurt that soul, there will come a cry, piercing to the listener. This was new, when Rossetti said it: but two generations of critics have made it seem less new.

Sonnet LXII, *The Soul's Sphere*, (86), a fine poem brooding upon the power of the soul to create images which may seem like the only reality. Four of the lines reveal the years of misery Rossetti suffered from sleeplessness. In the last six lines are good examples of Rossetti's powers. From the second and third of these a painter could create an enchanting design. The fifth and sixth are the vision and the music of great poetry.

Sonnet LXIII, *Inclusiveness*, (9), is an early poem, placed here, after the description of the soul's powers to make images, to show the infinite power of all things upon the soul. It is one of the finest of the sonnets. It is rightly placed upon the same page with LXII as a piece of the same triumphant poetic style.



Sonnet LXIV, *Ardour and Memory*, (87), begins with a charming list of the delightful things in Nature; there are two most quotable and lovely lines in the first eight. The last six lines are designed in an unusual pattern! They seem to say that when all joys are gone, and storm is about to bring darkness there may be some colour yet in memory. A semi-colon at the end of the thirteenth line in this sonnet makes the last line somewhat detached from anything.

Sonnet LXV, *Known in Vain*, (6), was mentioned by Rossetti as one of the best of the series. It must be one of the first examples of his famous endings, of a heaped line followed by a collapsing line. The poem begins with the image of two who discover too late the supreme importance of Love. It passes to the image of the two powers, Work and Will, within a soul, discovering, too late, that Life has gone by, and that they have not united. Why Rossetti should have liked it so much may be guessed. It was difficult to do, and being done, shewed a mastery. Later, he did master's work with ease, but not with the same sense of triumph.

Sonnet LXVI, *The Heart of the Night*, (80), reads as though a late re-reading of the foregoing, in some grim time of sorrow, had made Rossetti face what remained to him. Life was nearing its end; his spirit was to go back into the immortality from which it came; his body back into the dust. There remained to him:—Life, which claims to be accepted and served; Peace, which needs to be saved, like a harvest, out of struggle; Work, which has to be found again, having, somehow, been lost; and Will, which has to be regenerated. His judgment seems to be that the right accomplishment of these tasks, or attainment of these qualities, might allow his soul to know reality in Death.

Sonnet LXVII, *The Landmark*, (8). This early poem is placed late in the re-arrangement of the series, no doubt,



with many revisals of old judgments. The mark of the poem is plainly a mental mark. Many artists who rebel against the art of their time, or of their immediate elders, may, in twenty or thirty years come to see some worthiness in the rejected manner, and some condemnation of their dead young selves in the old rebellion.

Sonnet LXVIII, *A Dark Day*, (24), is a perplexing poem, beginning with shrewd lines exactly describing certain weather symptoms; then passing to a hard grimness about some frightful memory not made clear to us. The remaining six lines seem to belong to a different and much more resigned mood. They talk, not of the darkness of the day, but of the growing ease of the going. The old thistles which prickled are now thistledown which may make a soft mattress.

Sonnet LXIX, *Autumn Idleness*, (4), the three charming lines about the deer are a poem by themselves. The twelfth and thirteenth lines are a Chinese lyric by themselves; some would perhaps add to them the fourteenth also.

Sonnet LXX, *The Hill Summit*, (12), another memory of the country, has a fine line about the sinking sun, and two very fine lines about the fading of twilight. The last line is masterly.

Sonnets LXXI, LXXII, LXXIII, *The Choice*, (2), present, in turn, the points of view of the happy pagan, the puritan, and the humanist. The poems are the work of his astounding youth; each is fine, each is completely imagined and stated, and the growth of the movement is triumphant. Late in his life, Rossetti had doubts about these three, being worth keeping. The culmination at the end of the third sonnet is of the very essence of his very power.

Sonnets LXXIV, LXXV, LXXVI, *Old and New Art*, (3) are early broodings upon the ways of art, and the hopes of the artist; in one, catching at the hope, that art might revive



with some reviving religious joy; in another, glad with the proud hope that the knowledge of old art may light the way to a new and marvellous art; and in the last, urging all forward, because to any one of them the living illumination may be given.

Sonnet LXXVII, *Soul's Beauty*, (10), is a sonnet for a picture. In the last six of its lines, (which may be read with XXIV, and XLIV) it is a summary of Rossetti's practice of seeking the principle of Beauty in all things. Such was his faith, such was his practice, through long and troubled years.

Sonnet LXVIII, *Body's Beauty*, (11), also a sonnet for a picture, brings in *Lilith* the heroine of the *Eden Bower* poem. The delightful fourth line and the wise fifth line and the finishing touch of the last line are not to be beaten.

Sonnet LXXIX, *The Monochord*, (30), records an intense mood roused by music. Few poets can have been more sensitive to music; none has been taken by it into deeper or more varied reverie. Is there any emotion to be stirred by music not recorded here?

Sonnet LXXX, *From Dawn to Noon*, (75), has a startling opening, about the uncritical mind of the child, and then, after some lines which are a marking of time, comes to the point of the work, the nature of the mature mind. To Rossetti, the matured thought is a living person, seeing the Hope which led him forward in youth, and the hard Reality attained; and wondering, which led him, which misled, illusion or knowledge? As always, in Rossetti, when the thought is thus made living, he abides by the reader.

Sonnet LXXXI, *Memorial Thresholds*, (81), is one of the difficult and certainly one of the intensest of the personal utterances. What is its meaning? There seems to have fallen upon him in imagination or dream an illumination giving sudden, fierce and poignant feeling to the memory of



a door, linked intimately in some way with the poet and with another, yet passed daily by crowds who in no way regard it. The poet takes this intensity of feeling and of meaning to be evidence of an eternity, of which mortal life gives only the suggestion. But the cold doubt adds that all this may be a mockery, like city, time, poetry and poet.

Sonnet LXXXII, *Hoarded Joy*, (47) is the sad cry of one who hoped for harvest, and saw his hope and harvest ruined, and had no remedy, save to snatch the remnants at once, ere things worsened.

Sonnet LXXXIII, *Barren Spring*, (48). It seems to have been an unusual Spring, even for England, but to an unhappy man it was not Spring, nor any bringer of Hope.

Sonnet LXXXIV, *Farewell to the Glen*, (25) is said to have been a farewell to the Glen through which the Burn of Telwhappie flows past Pinkill to the Girvan Water, in Ayrshire. Rossetti had been cheered and charmed there, to revived interest in poetry of different kinds. What shocking hour of despair he endured there, before writing the end of this sonnet, cannot now be known. He had begun in the glen quite the saddest and one of the most beautiful of his poems; the place had had power upon him.

Sonnet LXXXV, *Vain Virtues*, (13), is now a little cooler for some verbal alterations made in it. The idea is, that Love being the great good of the world, a certain mean nullity of feeling, a starvation of the faculty of Love, should not be called Virtue, but one of the scurviest of vices.

Sonnet LXXXVI, *Lost Days*, (14), another of those liked by Rossetti, is one of the flawless and startling poems, coming fiery, like a person with a warning, into a reader's spirit.

Sonnet LXXXVII, *Death's Songsters*, (15), is among the finest of them all. It comes out of the world of the Imagination as a Myth, from which an epic poem, or two, or three,



might be made. What painter or poet could fail to be startled to a mood of creation by it? The Wooden Horse has been drawn into Troy; some of the Trojan elders, a little doubtful about it, bring Helen there and cause her to sing the songs of home. Helen whispers to the men in the Horse, that she is alone, and bids them come out; Ulysses, within the Horse, restrains his men. All this is superb poetical invention, from which, some day, great work will be made. In the sonnet, all this is wrought in the first eight lines; there follow four pleasant lines about Ulysses and his passing of the Sirens, those other songsters of Death; and then comes a final couplet, a sonnet-ending in which few are happy, and Rossetti as seldom as the rest. The first line of the couplet may pass, but the second halts. The meaning of the couplet is "O Soul, is it not Heaven to overcome these songs luring to Death? Does not the (glowing) cheek of Victory shame the (pale) lip of Death?" The reader is left wondering what the original readings of the sonnet were. It reads, as though the ending had been revised in some cold and infertile mood, when the glory of creation had chilled. The reading given occurs in all the three editions seen by the poet, as well as in those issued by his Brother. Still, nothing cold or infertile was in him at his superb beginning.

Sonnet LXXXVIII, *Hero's Lamp*, (82), reads like a tired man's questioning of the divinity or devilry of Love; a wondering from which it springs.

Sonnet LXXXIX, *The Trees of the Garden*, (83), is a tired man's comparison of the littleness and strangeness of Life with some of its august enduring background.

Sonnet XC, *Retro me Sathana*, the earliest of all these sonnets, perhaps written when he was working at one of his earliest designs, and before any thought came to him of the House of Life, is brought in here as the artist's defiance to all these moods of the tired man. The poet cries that the



world, time and temptation will all presently be nothing, but the artist, within his path of consecration, is safe from all three.

Sonnet XCI, *Lost on Both Sides*, (16), has in full measure the peculiar power and strangeness of Rossetti's gift. As two men, bitter rivals for the love of a woman, may become friends when Death takes her, so, in a soul, two hopes, bitter rivals for Peace, may become friends when Peace dies, and in a forlorn way linger on. To Rossetti, of course, these two hopes were living presences, and the soul a city where such people might well be lost and unfriended. This sonnet (especially its last line) was very famous fifty years ago; and if a less happy time has overlooked it, happiness awaits those who discover and re-discover.

Sonnets XCII, XCIII, *The Sun's Shame*, (84), are to be taken as a single stanza in the poem. XCII has a deliberate suggestion of Shakespeare's "Tired with all these", but the illustrations and images are wholly Rossetti's; the 7th and 8th lines could be by no other poet; they would be known for his anywhere.

Even with such personal power, Rossetti is no less tired than Shakespeare. In XCIII, after a memorable prelude, there comes a suggestion, that the passage through Life, from green leaf to autumn, though it be evil and atrocious, may create something of a soul in the pilgrim, unhappy enough, perhaps, and yet spiritual, where before were only senses and senselessness.

Sonnet XCLV, *Michelangelo's Kiss*, (91) tells, that even though the rewards given on this earth for attainment be tiny, the true attainment, after noble effort long continued, in the narrow and difficult ways of art, will leave the men of after ages dumb.

Sonnet XCV, *The Vase of Life*, (26), is perhaps a brooding upon the life of the artist whose work takes him much into



the world of the imagination. Such a man must see his life as, in a way, remote from possessions and from his fellows; unreal, indeed, in the judgement of many; and often, to himself, unhappy, yet so consecrate, so touched with hope, that it must not be self-destroyed, even though, when preserved, it may seem empty at the end.

Sonnet XCVI, *Life, the Beloved*, (76), is one of the more hopeful of the mature works. It says, that Love hallows all memory of persons, and shews them ever in beauty, and that this, Love and the beauty it brings, must be the abiding principle, while trouble, sorrow, sickness and Death itself are as clouds passing. The last lines of this sonnet may refer, very piteously, to the February day when his Wife was buried; for some such weather prevailed over London on that day.

Sonnet XCVII, *A Superscription*, (18), is one witness more to the remorse that cannot sleep and the sorrow that cannot be comforted. Those two dread powers merge into one within him and usurp his soul.

Sonnet XCVIII, *He and I*, (31), and here they are in charge, while he looks at them, and knows all things through them.

These terrible stanzas prepare the ending. They are followed by the double stanza of

Sonnets XCIX & C, *Newborn Death*, (32), which spring from a very different mood. XCIX speaks of Death as a playmate given to the aged by Life, as, indeed, a living presence who may prove to be helpful and a companion, when fuller knowledge is had. The hundredth sonnet, another very fine stanza, considers Life as one who has been mingled with his soul through deep and high experience, a mingling that has borne children, Love, Song and Art, the three wonderful things; he asks, if these have died, so that Death might then be borne to them? The mood of the sonnet suggests, that Death may, conceivably, be an



opportunity for the making of beauty; but even that is not his innermost Hope, which is the subject of

Sonnet CI, *The One Hope*, (33), which ends the series. It asks the question asked by so many millions, What will happen to Longing and Memory when Death comes? Shall we still have to seek for Peace, or shall we find it? In a few lines of much tender beauty the poem ends with the prayer, that in that new way of living, the soul may find the one Hope's one name.

This Hope has a different name for each one of us.



## MISCELLANEOUS POEMS

IN Mr. W. M. Rossetti's edition of the *Collected Works*, the *House of Life* is followed by a division of work headed II. *Miscellaneous Poems*.

This begins with the astonishing works of the poet's extraordinary youth; and first of these comes *My Sister's Sleep*, a poem in quatrains of eight syllabled lines, of which the first rhymes with the fourth, and the second with the third. At the moment, I can think of no earlier use of this form of stanza. Some years later, Tennyson used it for *In Memoriam*.

The poem was first printed in *The Germ*, as one of the Songs of our Household, and many readers might suppose, and have supposed, that it describes the death of a sister of the poet, and that its power and simplicity come from overwhelming personal loss. This is not so. It does not describe the death of any one known to the Rossettis. It remains inexplicable, as the result of genius, vision or significant dream, when the poet was nineteen or twenty years old. It is unlike any English poem. It is a painter's piece, shewing a room lit by firelight and a single candle, with some moonlight struggling in from without. The poem begins with the expectation and ends with the presence of Death upon an early Christmas morning, as the Mother and the poet watch the death-bed. The poem is wonderful for its feeling and truth; the thing was so, even so, nothing could be added, nothing removed, without loss; thus it must have been, and each instant of it was eternal to those there.



The first version of it, in *The Germ*, has some readings which Rossetti afterwards removed. It was his will that they should be removed, and they should not be replaced; but they are very good lines, and some appendix in future editions should preserve them for loving readers.

The poem which follows this, *The Blessed Damsel*, is usually reckoned the most surprising work of this startling boy. He was, surely, the most splendid and amazing boy who ever kindled youth in this land. He DID kindle youth; and who can wonder that the writer of such poems should carry the youth of his time to reform the art of the age?

Later in his life, he painted *The Blessed Damsel* from one of the most beautiful of his women-models in more than one important picture. As the painting, in one of its forms, has been very frequently reproduced, and much loved, and as the poem is often quoted, and the best-known of all his poems, there can be little need to write of it. He worked upon the poem at intervals during many years.

It begins the 1870 volume of his *Poems*. His Brother begins the later *Collected Works* with *Dante at Verona*. The two poems show the two sides of the Dante influence in Rossetti, both so very powerful in his youth; Dante, the exile, seeking in his thought the beauty now in Paradise: Beatrice, the exile in Paradise, watching her lover in his sorrow still upon earth.

The early sonnet, *At the Sun-Rise* in 1848, has the grace, the clearness and freshness of the young man's mind through the first six lines; later, there is some indecision, which, later still, props itself upon convention.

*Autumn Song* is a very lovely autumnal utterance; but why was he writing thus in his ecstatic Spring? He wrote from the power of poetry, "which present, past and future sees".

*The Lady's Lament*. She laments a little too long, but very beautifully.



Another early and very beautiful poem, the fruit, perhaps, of the mood which made the *Blessed Damsel*, is *The Portrait*. This is the imagined reverie of a painter over the portrait of his dead love. It so fits the tragic fate of Rossetti and his Wife that many have supposed it to be written after her death. It is not so; it is as much a young man's fantasy as *The Blessed Damsel* or *My Sister's Sleep*. For some reason, it has not been so widely known as the splendid sonnet which bears the same title, nor as the other two poems just mentioned. It is among the very best of this astounding youth's early work. It has a grace, a freshness and a purity of note like some of his early paintings.

It is written in a stanza which seems to be his own invention; I can remember no other use of it. As usual, it is a choice stanza, subtly arranged, so that the ear shall first be gratified by the falling of a rhyme, then held in suspense by its delay, then delighted by its granting.

The beauty and grace of the dead woman are suggested as being painted within some such mysterious wood as figures in some early drawings; it is a wood of romance, with whisperings, mutterings, will-of-the-wisps moving, and the terror of your own footsteps coming towards you. This early symbol of the wood, is followed, a little later, by his other frequent symbol, the spring, whose mysterious water appears with such significance elsewhere. The wood is the place of the lovers' meeting; they drink of the spring together, and the painter in his joy painted his love as in the wood, the next day.

Afterwards, in his bereavement, while wandering in the night, he comes to the very place in the wood; this suggests, by cruel contrast, the coming suddenly into Paradise after death, into her very spirit.

The extraordinary tenderness of the mood of the last stanza takes the poem into another world of symbol, of



**Palestine and the first crusades.** Such symbols had much power upon the minds of poetry-readers, then, and seemed natural in any poem of feeling. To us, the last stanza seems difficult, and out of the mood of what came before it.

The poem *Ave*, a rather long early work in eight-syllabled couplets, is one of the few poems from a mood of religious feeling and brooding which caused him to paint several of his best-known early pictures, *Ecce Ancilla Domini*, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, and *Mary in the House of John*. It reads as though he were thinking of painting a series of pictures shewing the Life of the Virgin Mary. The poem is, as it were, designed in panels of paintings to set upon each side of an altar over which would stand the final picture of The Enthronement.

Most of the churches let slip their chance of paintings by him: not quite all. Llandaff gave an opportunity.

*The Card-Dealer*, a strange and sinister little poem, reads like a study for a picture, and though he never painted the subject, the reader wishes that he had. In any period of his painting-life he would have made it a memorable work, of beauty, and terror. A strange, splendid, mysterious figure, with gold hair and with wealth beside her, sits at a card-table in a dance hall, amid music and the beating of the feet of dancers, dealing the cards from her jewelled fingers to intent men who think that the game is called Life, whereas she knows that it is called Death.

The mood of the poem is unusual in his poetry but two or three of his smaller drawings have similar grim suggestion. The suddenness and sharpness of the poem's end is impressive.

*World's Worth*, a very early poem, first printed in *The Germ* and much revised before reprinting, is another fruit of the mood of religious brooding which led to some of the early paintings. Young men at that time were much moved



towards mediæval ritual and the inner mysteries of religion. Rossetti wrote the poem after a visit to the Continent, where he saw Flemish Gothic building at its best. There is a startling image in the second stanza of rain-puddles on the leads of a church-tower.

The sonnet *On Refusal of Aid Between Nations* is another astonishing very early poem, the nobility of which has been borne-in upon many by frightful apathies here and elsewhere. How many must have repeated it with anguish during the last appalling years? How soon will men be repeating it again?

The sonnet *On the Vita Nuova of Dante*, must be one of his very earliest references to Dante. It is immature work, with a gracious beginning which rings as though it were ten years later than the rest of it.

*Song and Music*, a delicate song in two stanzas, seems to record an experience. How the two people mentioned had arranged themselves for singing and listening invites enquiry.

In several poems there are allusions to the sea-beach, the stretch of sea, and the emptiness of sky beyond. His mention of these things is always impressive. They come again, with compelling strange power, into the four stanzas of *The Sea-Limits*, in which he bids man listen to the sea, the telling of the lapse of time. The poem lifts the heart with a sense of the vastness and eternity of life's setting; daunts it with the knowledge of man's littleness; and, at the end kindles any heart with courage by shewing its unity with its setting and its mortal fellow.

There are ten pages of the very early verse describing his visit to France and Belgium with Holman Hunt in the autumn of 1849. About half of these poems are in blank verse, just as they were written in the train in letters to his Brother. They are perhaps among the very first poems ever



written in trains. They are less good as records than as impressions. Most people know the routes over which his trains took him, but no man could say where any one impression was made. He has one very swift clear impression of a shadow; a shrewd comment on French countrywomen, and a swift note of flying sparks. A railway traveller then was still something of a dare-devil and pioneer; Rossetti seems to tell the stay-at-homes that they will find something of his experience in the well-known picture by Turner. There is an admirable line at the opening of the sonnet on the *Place de la Bastille, Paris*. The little poem, *Near Brussels*, has two painter's notes, one for the figure, one for the great Continental landscape. There is all a cold gray Flemish landscape in *On Leaving Bruges*. The delightful poem of *Antwerp & Bruges* is now shorn of a stanza which once (as I think) graced it. Still, the excision was made by Rossetti, and that must suffice. It helped to carry-on the impression of the ever-trembling sound of the bells.

The sonnet, *Vox Ecclesiæ, Vox Christi*, grows slowly, through its first eight lines to some force of righteous indignation; after the eighth line it halts somewhat.

It has been said by the mocker:—

“Lines of great men oft remind us  
How to make our lines sublime.”

Rossetti was one of the original creators of his century, and needed no prompting to strange and beautiful effects of verse. Yet, when he wrote his startling poem of *The Burden of Nineveh* could his memory have been haunted by the insistent trampling rhythm of a lesser man and “Iser rolling rapidly?”

Whatever the prompting may have been, he makes a triumphant use of the rhythm in a remarkable poem, one of



the most stirring of his poems of reverie. The poem is an unfolding of his thoughts, on seeing one of the great stone winged-bulls from the temples of Nineveh hoisted-in to the British Museum. The bulls are (or were, before the war) still there, and those who see them would not think that their appearance could touch any living nerve of poetry in a modern mind. Rossetti saw his single specimen after looking at Greek work of different sorts: the contrast, and other suggested contrasts, provoked intense utterance. He was roused into speaking from his whole great nature, with the effect of bright light being flung upon the case.

Some stanzas of this extraordinary poem evoke all Nineveh, with all the strangeness, horror, passion and death amid which the image had stood.

As it chanced, though the day had (seemingly) been wet, some London sunlight shone upon the thing, so that its shadow fell upon the stone. This, and the knowledge that for untold centuries the thing had been under the drifts without a shadow, lit up four superb stanzas which no other poet could have imagined or made. In a later stanza, there is the thought that perhaps one of the mummies in the Egyptian Room upstairs, might, when alive, have visited Nineveh and seen the image at the temple. In another stanza are three exquisite painter's lines, with the effect of the sunlight going. Then, in the gloom and roar of London the poet considers that perhaps this image, long hence, may be found where it now stands, and be mistaken for a British god. Men read the last stanza with differing interpretations; but it is read by some as a question: "Is it not a British god"? Certain points in its appearance are quoted as evidence that it is, or was then, very like some of the objects of popular worship.

The sonnet, *The Church-Porch*, must be very early work. Perhaps it commemorates some summer visit of himself and



his Sister to Westminster Abbey, or some cathedral; the lines suggest a grand building, with many associations.

*The Mirror*, is a bitter little lyric of unusual power and compression. It is what Browning would have called a dramatic lyric; it has within it the seed for appalling introspective plays of the tragedy of misunderstanding.

*A Young Fir-Wood*, an early lyric from something seen in Kent, in 1850, exhausts its lyric cry in the first stanza; the morality of the second stanza takes from the poetry of the first.

*During Music*, his thoughts seem to have wandered much towards the musician.

*Stratton Water*, a Scottish tale, written with a mind full of memories of the Border ballads, and in ballad measure, is a not very probable fiction, and a faulty piece of story-telling. It has some neat and poignant stanzas, and some effective impressions of water in flood. The poem is in the main an impression of flood, of the waste and desolation of uncontrolled water, of foundations and landmarks removed, of old order ended.

*Wellington's Funeral*, (18th November, 1852). For many years, this poem seemed a difficult and unsuccessful work. It is certainly difficult; and must have been a sad puzzle to the august shade, when the shadow of his orderly read it to him. Close reading will illuminate most of it. A triumphant spirit has gone from the earth, perhaps to be welcomed in triumph elsewhere, as one who used the mental power given to him for man's great good. This spirit and mental power may be needed again, for the threat of war is stirring in Europe, and the ghost of the First Napoleon sees his successor in France rousing (in England) some successor to Wellington. The poem was written the year after the Coup d'Etat, before the world had learned that governments beginning with murder end in massacre.



*Penumbra.* These six stanzas, of intricate construction with internal rhymes, make a dramatic lyric. They give five illustrations, (the fourth of which would be better away) of some over-scrupulousness, or over-sensitive rejection of natural impulse. The last stanza makes it clear that this shrinking or rejection will haunt the poet later.

Five sonnets follow. These are:—

*On the Site of a Mulberry-Tree*, (cut down at Stratford-on-Avon) a playful frolic with a very jolly last line.

*On Certain Elizabethan Revivals*, we know not which, unpleasing to Rossetti. Such things were very rare in Rossetti's time; but legends survive, that some Webster plays were given at the old Sadler's Wells Theatre; perhaps these are meant.

*English May*, a personal poem to Miss Siddal.

*Beauty and the Bird*, a charming account of a girl feeding a tame bird from her mouth. Walter Deverell, the Pre-Raphaelite Brother, painted such a subject in a delightful picture; but his lady was rather brown than golden.

*A Match with the Moon*, no doubt the record of a weary night-walk, in which his mind found some solace in seeking similes for the moon; some of them are very good.

*Love's Nocturn.* This elaborate fantasy, written in intricate stanzas with internal rhymes difficult to mark in speech, is an address to the figure of Love in his office as lord of dreams. The poet beseeches this Love to help him in his wooing. He says that Love has multitudinous dreams in his power; he asks, if it be true that the images of men are flung among them, so that, if he were to enter that land of dream he might meet his own image there? He asks that Love may send such a phantom of himself to her, so that it may sing to her of her blessing and moan to her of the hungry longing for her. If the sent phantom find some other phantom already at her side, then let his image pass away into dream;



and yet, since Love is the master of Life, the poet asks for Life.

It was ever Rossetti's power to give reality to thoughts, dreams and fictions. The poem might be an elaborate study for some early painting or series of paintings in which his spirit would be shewn praying to Love in the dream-world, and passing thence to his beloved's presence.

*First Love Remembered*, one of the songs first printed at the end of the *House of Life*, is a gentle tribute to the memory of some gracious woman, probably quite unconscious that she had ever stirred a very remarkable boy. Perhaps Sonnet XXXVII, in the *House of Life*, refers to her.

*Plighted Promise*, once the third song from the *House of Life*, suggests that the poet was writing to some known and unusual tune.

*Sudden Light*, the best-known of the lesser poems, and very frequently quoted. The first stanza is the lyric; all the inspiration is there. The second stanza has a line and a half of illustration. The third, bending to itself the joy, doth the winged life enchain.

*A New Year's Burden* is a neat and gloomy song; but it is sunlight to

*Even So*, a song of heart-break and disillusion, and to

*The Woodspurge*, the very famous song of heart-break.

*Dantis Tenebræ*. This very fine but difficult sonnet, written in the memory of his Father, tells of the depth and power of the Dante influence upon them both. He, like his Father, was in the "darkness of Dante", knowing himself called to the mystical quest, and the presence, all about him, of darkness, mystery and magic, through which he (unlike his Father) could see Dante's track to the hills, and, by Dante's poem, catch the noise of the fountain of wisdom. Dante at the end was in a blaze of the very fountain and fire of light. He, unlike Dante, had towards sunset in the



diminishing light a view of great clouds gathered, looking like mountains to climb, but being only clouds. Some suggestion is given, that the Father, though misled by these clouds, into thinking them mountains, (he was an interpreter of *The Divine Comedy* according to an ingenious theory) might still be pursuing his quest.

*Words on the Window-Pane*, (For a Woman's Fragmentary Inscription) seems to recall something somewhere seen. The inscription must have been of a gloomy kind, as far as it went. Rossetti's sympathy for the unknown scratcher of the words makes the end of the sonnet memorable; the last two lines are fine.

*An Old Song Ended*. His sympathy and understanding make this sad little song of a dying woman's message to her pilgrim lover very beautiful. The last lines are exquisite.

*The Song of the Bower*, suggests, that in spite of considerable attraction, which made the present uncomfortable, the poet had avoided the bower in the past, and had no chance of getting to it in the future. It is thought that it was written to Miss Siddal during his courtship or engagement.

*Dawn on the Night-Journey*, the third line is all the poem.

*A Little While*, the seventh and eighth lines make a little poem by themselves.

*Troy Town* is one of the matchless three, with *Eden Bower* and *Sister Helen*. Each deals in a different way with the great power of desire to work for selfish ends upon the varying stuff of life. Few powers are greater; few more awful; their culminations in destruction now lie heavily on the world.

With singular grace of verse, a happy choice of refrain, and a bold use of the Fitzgerald stanza in eight-syllabled lines, he imagines Helen, the Queen of Sparta, making a magical gift to the Goddess of Love, beseeching the love of Paris, and knowing the granting of her prayer. The poem is singularly perfect in manner and matter; it drives home its



word, that Helen, the Goddess of Love, and deep human desire are all very beautiful, and may all be linked with coming ruin.

*Eden Bower*, the third of this group, is the greatest triumph of his poetical invention. Lilith, the reputed wife of Adam in Eden before the Fall, was but a name, (barely even a name) to us, before Rossetti. In an early sonnet, he wrote of her as *Body's Beauty*; in the years 1864-1868 he painted and drew her, usually as a lazy languorous woman brushing her golden hair at a mirror, and having much less deliberate will than sensual attraction. In the poem, however, he makes her unique, utterly unlike anything in our poetry, and full of inhuman, elementary fever and fire. He makes her a dweller in Eden from of old, once a snake, the mate of the Serpent, but by some will of the Earth given the form of a woman and made the bewitcher and lover of Adam before the creation of Eve. On the creation of Eve, she is cast out from Eden. In the madness of jealousy, desertion and lust for vengeance, she calls the Serpent to her, so that she may borrow his shape, creep back into the garden, and there tempt Eve to the eating of the forbidden fruit. This is Rossetti's own most interesting poetical invention, carried out with mastery, to be a myth for future poets, and to people all a Paradise of the mind.

*Love-Lily* is a graceful early love-song, no doubt offered to Miss Siddal.

*Sunset Wings*, is one of the best of our many poems about evening and birds. All who read through Rossetti must notice his interest in the sudden movements of birds. Here he considers not only the sudden but the deliberate movement. Here is all an autumnal or winter evening with its starlings and rooks, and the thoughts which come with all sunset and cannot all go at every morning.

*The Cloud Confines*. The cloud is the veil keeping us from



knowledge, and the poem is about the strangeness of our thought, that death may give us knowledge. The bleakness gives a strange foretaste of Thomas Hardy; the verse is choice.

*Down 'Stream* refers to an unhappy woman's death by drowning in the Thames near Kelmscott. The image of the moon in the water occurring here, was a favourite image with him.

*Three Shadows*, an experiment, cleverly laboured, in delayed rhymes, makes a pretty love-song, once, no doubt, offered to Miss Siddal.

*A Death-Parting*. No poet so sad has ever made a better song; and perhaps no sadder song has ever been made. Was this also made at Kelmscott, where the willows haunt all nature?

*Spring*, a very delightful sonnet, must not be read as the monument of a moment of Spring, but as a procession of the images of an English Spring, which is so often a succession (or suppression) of moments rather than a season. The poem records some such succession at Kelmscott; first the lambing, which, although a winter thing, has promise of spring in it; then, with a stride to a second period of late March or early April, to young rooks, nesting moorhens and marigolds; and then on to mid, or late April, with cuckoo and cuckoo-flower. The earlier suggestions, in the first five lines, are the strongest. Possibly, the rest was written later, in another mood.

*Untimely Lost* is a sonnet to the memory of Oliver Madox Brown, a gifted lad who died in 1874. Those were sad years for Rossetti; what Hope remained to him was often cruelly tested, as the last line and the following four poems show.

*Parted Presence* preserves what sad measure of Hope was in him still.



*Spherical Change* shows that the Hope was of the nature of dream, if not of nightmare:

*Alas, So Long*, or, if neither dream nor nightmare, two thirds of cruel memory to one third of longing.

*Insomnia* shews that the longing and remorse together brought the thought that:—*perhaps the faith will create the thing it longs for.*

*Possession* is a lyric of three lines laboured over into ten and killed.

All who care for poetical skill must delight in the seven little imitations of bell-music known as *Chimes*. All are skilful; and there is tenderness or playfulness in all the imagined tragedies, for six of the seven suggest disaster. Are they never set and sung, to accompaniments of hand-bells? Do not the teachers of speech contrive bell-effects by massed voices with them?

After these, comes the mature and noble poem *Soothsay*, which is not known as it deserves to be.

It contains fourteen stanzas of apothegm and good counsel, from a life's experience and a clear mind's judgement. It urges man to keep to what is known; to think nobly of what is unknown; to think little of worldly greatness, because it cannot last; to think very much of the arts, of love, and of early companionships; to shun pride and flattery; to dread the friend who becomes an enemy; to be generous in sharing; to be ardent in keeping a high standard of work; to dread the doing nothing; to take what good religion can offer; to be glad of all good; to keep the great things clear in the memory, and so to live, that there may be little to regret. The experience of most good lives and the judgement of most clear minds would perhaps resolve into similar counsel (save for that insistence on the arts). The telling, fateful seven-lined stanza is a thing of Rossetti's own and the force and the strangeness of some of the



stanzas, such as the first four, the sixth, the ninth, tenth and eleventh, make this poem one of his best.

After reading it, the questions asked are:—Why is this not better known? Why is this not quoted, in a nation prone to quoting good counsel? It is hard to say, why it is not better known, for it is a fine thing, and a choice example of Rossetti's style and thought at its best. Even Rossetti lovers seldom know it; and it is rare in anthologies. Perhaps, it may not be quite limpid enough for ready delivery, as the quotation should be. Often, even in the finest stanzas, the thought is subtle, unusual, not caught at a first reading; the door has to be pushed open with some little effort, before what lies beyond is made clear. The stanzas are mostly poems in themselves, to be brooded on alone. He who reads them through at once is aware that there is a decline towards the end, instead of the expected, and hoped-for, rising of exaltation, and full ending. But for this failing of the beauty, this clouding when one expects the sunset, the poem would be the familiar friend of millions.

*Five English Poets* receive each a sonnet. Chatterton heads the party, for Rossetti (perhaps late in life) admired him as a pioneer, who walked in the crooked ways without improvement which are the ways of genius, as one of the beginners of the Romantic Movement. Rossetti's admiration is perhaps like that formerly held by Keats, a fellow-feeling, that Chatterton was a brother groping towards the same things in art, and groping against all the force of the main current of the time.

The sonnet shows that Rossetti knew all that was then to be known of Chatterton and had brooded on him deeply and often.

The sonnet on Blake is in the main concerned with a drawing by Frederic Shields of Blake's workroom and death-room in Fountain Court. Rossetti was one of the first



to know Blake and to call the world's attention to him. He was one of the first lovers, disciples and understanders; he helped to complete the standard Life of Blake, when Alexander Gilchrist died, and beyond doubt urged on and inspired the splendid later labour of Swinburne. The Shields drawing is reproduced in the Life of Blake by Gilchrist which Rossetti helped to finish.

The sonnet on Coleridge, who was Rossetti's favourite English poet, is too much of a critical survey and too little of a rapture. Coleridge talking of himself would have spun into similar cobwebs.

The sonnet on Keats (a poet deeply dear to Rossetti, and nobly praised by him) becomes better as it goes along; the last four lines are sometimes quoted; but again we find cold judgement killing delight; not delight sweeping all judgement into rapture.

The sonnet on Shelley is an inscription for the Couch (once owned by Leigh Hunt, by Brown, Keats's friend, and later by Mr. W. M. Rossetti) on which Shelley is supposed to have passed the last night of his life. Gabriel Rossetti did not share his brother's intense admiration for Shelley, but wrote tellingly, from knowledge, after a wide survey of the man's achievement and promise.

There follows a feeling and friendly sonnet to the blind poet Philip Bourke Marston, a much-loved man of genius.

*Tiber, Nile, and Thames*, is a white-hot utterance, solely Rossetti's; no other could have known or felt the thing. The obelisk, called Cleopatra's Needle, was brought to London, with a good deal of difficulty, and set-up there, in 1877-8. None but Rossetti received the subtle suggestions. Cleopatra suggested Mark Antony, and Mark Antony the sweet speech over the body of Cæsar. Then, Mark Antony suggested his wife, Fulvia, who, with her needle, outraged the head of the dead Cicero, the sweet speaker. Now, this



Needle, which had brought these suggestions, was in a city which had recently scorned three sweet speakers, Keats, Coleridge and Chatterton. Without being one of the very best of Rossetti's sonnets, it is a fine piece of style and feeling; it strikes home and leaves a memory and an unrest.

The sonnet on *Raleigh's Cell in the Tower* has two good final lines.

The sonnet *Winter* must be another leaf from the sketch-book at Kelmscott. The first line, which often comes to mind in winter, gives a good image of a missel thrush. The ninth, tenth and eleventh lines are admirable painter's lines describing the wreck of river-sedge in frost. There is a kind of stormy roar about the last three lines very jolly to think of by the fire.

*The Last Three from Trafalgar* compresses within itself all that can be said on the occasion; it has a splendid sense of the passion of Nelson, an awful sense of a great battle, and much tenderness to the three old Pensioners, "lying in Greenwich Tier", the last survivors of the day. The date is not given, save as 187- (presumably '78 or '79). I believe that one of the old pensioners out-lived Rossetti.

*Czar Alexander the Second*, murdered in 1881, a generous, humane man, giver of freedom to many millions of men, is here fittingly praised by one who felt his greatness.

The Third division of the *Collected Works* contains only eleven "*Sonnets on Pictures*". One of the pictures addressed, the famous Spring of Botticelli, he perhaps never knew save in reproduction or copy of some kind; the others he saw in London, Paris, or the Low Countries. One, I cannot certainly identify.

This, a German primitif, inspired the earliest of the eleven sonnets. It must be one of the earliest of his poems; it is in the precise P.R.B. manner and has charming little subtle touches which give it an intense life.



The sonnet on Leonardo's *Lady of the Rocks* is a much more mature work, and shews how instantly his Italian nature responded to Italian genius. The picture described must be the Louvre version. The sonnet leads one to judge that it was written partly from memory, when the figure of the infant John, a strangely beautiful invention, had become the significant figure. The painting moved him deeply; his mind went into it, and roved in it with reverent ecstasy. No man after reading such a sonnet will look idly on a painted masterpiece thenceforward.

The third, for *A Venetian Pastoral*, by Giorgione, another famous painting in the Louvre, is one of his best-known poems. The last line is a triumphant piece of interpretation and translation.

The same keen, warm artist's instinct for what the painter had in mind makes memorable the famous ending of the sonnet for *An Allegorical Dance of Women* by Mantegna. (The picture must be the great *Parnassus*.) Who but Rossetti could have caught that sudden hint for the seventh and eighth lines?

*Ruggiero and Angelica*, by Ingres, has two sonnets. The compression, the narrative power and the finish of this painting caught the young Rossetti at his most impressionable time.

Of the two sonnets on Memlinc's pictures at Bruges, the one on the *Marriage of St. Catherine* seems the best. Both are early work, and neither has much of imagination or interpretation till the last two lines.

The sonnet for *The Wine of Circe*, the well-known painting by Burne-Jones is mature work; it both summons-up and interprets the design.

The Fourth division of the *Collected Works* consists of *Sonnets and Verses* for Rossetti's own Works of Art. Some of these poems, like their paintings and drawings are very



well-known all over the world. The drawing of *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee* for which there is a sonnet here, contains much exquisite invention; the sonnet is simple drama; but, on the other hand, the sonnets on *Cassandra* are better than the drawing; and the sonnet on *Found* is certainly a more complete work of art than the never-finished painting. It is masterly exposition followed by simple drama. The sonnets in this Division were meant to accompany the works of art, as guides to the painter's thought; they need the works of art beside them. To most of us, they raise the question, were they written as studies for the paintings, were they the closely ordered plans from which he afterwards painted? Or were they written after the pictures had been completed and placed upon the picture-frame, so that the careful reader, if such came, might know some at least of the symbols charged with intellectual virtue which a strange mind had wrought to place there?

No doubt, the practice varies; sometimes the sonnet was the plan, sometimes the inventory. In either case, the mental power displayed is very great; the artist's faculty of exclusion severe, and his sight of the end clear and masterly. In these works of concentration, the sharpness of outline and the absence of all waste or overstatement, are the important qualities. It should soon be possible to print these sonnets with small reproductions of the works described, where these still exist or can be certainly known. One or two of the paintings described by Rossetti had disappeared before the wars, and may now have been destroyed.

Among the unfinished poems there are five stanzas of a poem, *The Orchard Pit*, for which there exists an elaborate prose study or sketch. The poem is said to date from about 1871. It must have occupied Rossetti's mind for a long time, the scene and the symbols must have haunted him, for



he took great pains to bring their waywardness to order. This he never quite managed, and though I feel sure that the subject tempted him now to painting, and then to poetry, he left it in the confused threat of nightmare. He never made the theme sufficiently simple for a work of art.

The prose tale is told in exquisite English; the verse of the five existing stanzas is as fine as the prose.

Sometimes, in reading, one feels, that perhaps he wrought at it too hardly and too long; and that had he left it, unwearied, and returned to it with a fresh mind after a few months, the simple theme would have shone forth and the work might have become triumphant. The qualities of beauty and strangeness in the fragment make one wish that this had happened. None but he could have invented or perfected the thing; just as none but he could have made the poem of *Joan of Arc* for his time and our time and all time.

The *Joan of Arc* poem never got further, I believe, than the collection of some material. He left very few unfinished poems.

The lines *Michael Scott's Wooing* were written for the frame of a picture for which some drawings were made. There is a carefully finished prose sketch of the tale of *Michael Scott's Wooing*. Had he written the tale, as ballad or as poetical narrative, following the main lines of the sketch, it would have been a remarkable work, like his other Scotch inspirations.

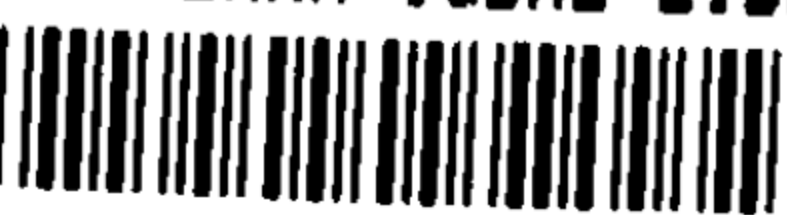
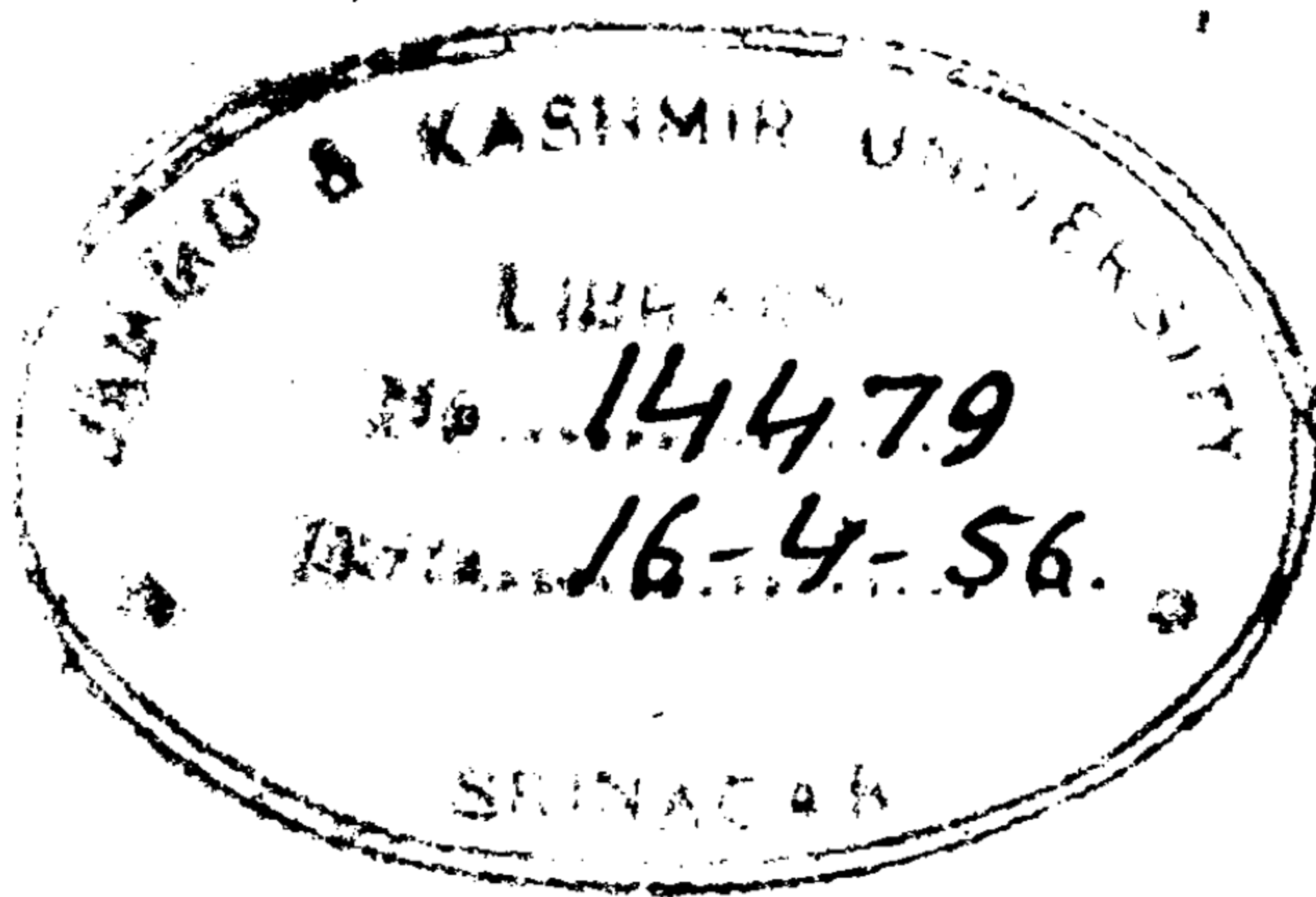
Among the tiny fragments preserved from his notes and papers, the most complete is the lyric from Petronius, on the *Sibyl at Cumæ*. The sudden and vivid note of a water-hen's flight is very happy. Three of the other bits, each two lines long come with strange weight from the power of an unusual mind. The bits are very precious, since they make us know that strange mind better.



## THANKS AT GOING

If men at dying pass into their thought  
(The world that from their dream and effort grew)  
Love and the sunlight will have given you  
The Hope achieved amid the Beauty sought!  
And by a water amid brilliant birds  
The wisdoms and desires of your quest  
Illumine you with power and with zest  
To fashion miracles from paints and words.

And by you, one by one, the Inspirations,  
The shining-eyed, the lovely-voiced, relate  
Stories of cities and their queens of pride;  
Of men in anguish in the hells of fate,  
Of beauty hallowing the deaths they died,  
That you, returning here, may tell the nations.

















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